Spicy Western Stories

JULY

25¢

ACE in the HOLE

by James A. Lawson

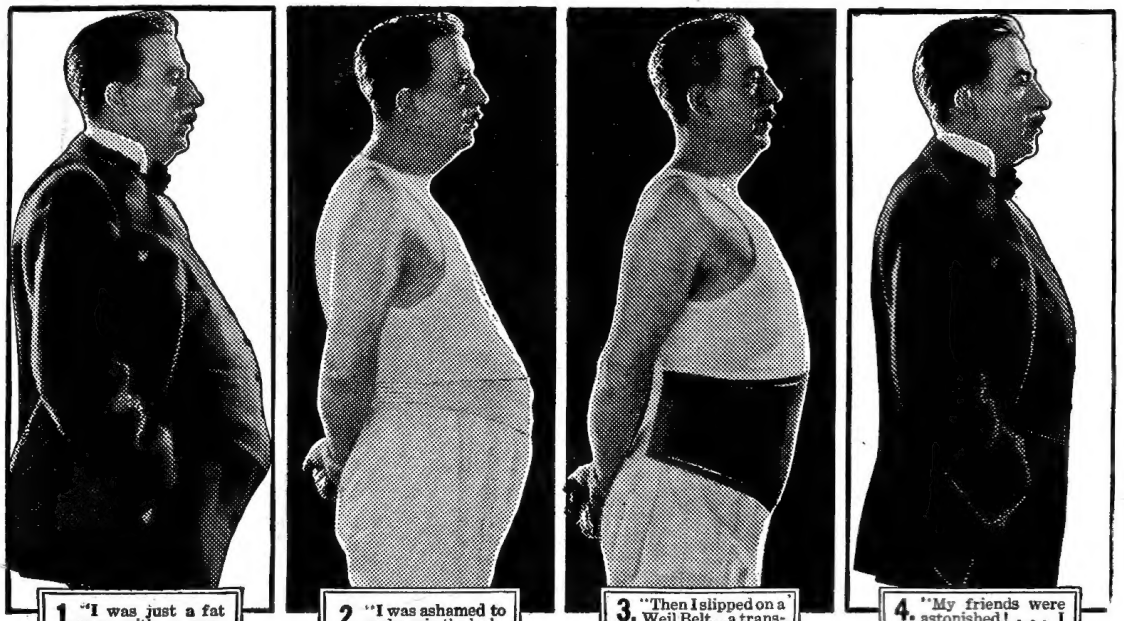
WARD

FROM A FAT MAN... to a HE-MAN... in 10 MINUTES!

"I REDUCED MY WAIST 8 INCHES" WRITES GEORGE BAILEY

"I lost 50 pounds" says W. T. Anderson. "My waist is 8 inches smaller" writes W. L. McGinnis. "Felt like a new man" claims Fred Wolf. "Wouldn't sell my belt for $100" writes C. W. Higbee.

ACTUAL PHOTOGRAPHS SHOWING THE IMMEDIATE IMPROVEMENT IN APPEARANCE



1. "I was just a fat man with a protruding stomach . . . ill at ease and clumsy—no pep to do anything!"

2. "I was ashamed to undress in the locker room—my friends poked fun at me and I had no answer!"

3. "Then I slipped on a Weil Belt...a transformation took place... what a difference — pounds seemed to have fallen away!"

4. "My friends were astonished! . . . I looked better — my clothes fitted me—and I felt like a million dollars!"

We are so sure that you will reduce your waistline at least *three* inches that we make this unqualified agreement...

If YOU do not REDUCE your WAIST THREE INCHES in TEN DAYS ◆◆◆

. . . *it won't cost you one cent!*

YES SIR: I too, promised myself that I would exercise but it was too much like work—and it's darn hard to diet when you like to eat. The Weil Belt was just the answer—no diets, no drugs, no exercises—I feel like a new man and I lost 8 inches of fat in less than 6 months!

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It supports the sagging muscles of the abdomen and *quickly gives an erect, athletic carriage.*

Don't be embarrassed any longer with that "corporation" for in a short time, only the admiring comments of your friends will remind you that you once had a bulging waistline.

SAFE, QUICK REDUCTION

You will be completely comfortable as the gentle pressure and massage-like action of your Weil Belt persistently eliminates fat as you work, walk or sit.

Many enthusiastic wearers write that when the abdominal walls are returned to normal position, indigestion and constipation are greatly relieved and that with loss of fat comes increased endurance and vigor.

DON'T WAIT—FAT IS DANGEROUS!

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Send for our 10 day free trial offer. We repeat—either you take off 3 inches of fat in ten days, or it won't *cost you one* penny!

SEND FOR 10 DAY FREE TRIAL OFFER

THE WEIL COMPANY, INC.
3810 HILL STREET, NEW HAVEN, CONN.

Gentlemen: Send me FREE, your illustrated folder describing *The Weil Belt and full details of your 10-day FREE trial offer.*

*Name*_____

*Address*_____

Use coupon or write your name and address on penny post card.

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I will Train You at Home in Spare Time for a GOOD JOB IN RADIO

These two fellows had the same chance. Each clipped and sent me a coupon, like the one in this ad. They got my book on Radio's opportunities. S. J. Ebert, 104-B Quadrangle, University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa, saw that Radio offered him a real chance. He enrolled. The other fellow, whom we will call John Doe, wrote that he wasn't interested. He was just one of those fellows who wants a better job, better pay, but never does anything about it. One of the many who spend their lives in a low-pay, no-future job, because they haven't the ambition, the determination, the action it takes to succeed.

But read what S. J. Ebert wrote me and remember that John Doe had the same chance: "Upon graduation I accepted a job as serviceman and within three weeks was made Service Manager. This job paid me $40 to $50 a week compared with $18 I earned in a shoe factory before. Eight months later I went with station KWCR as operator. From there I went to KTNT. Now I am Radio Engineer with WSUI. I certainly recommend the N. R. I. to all interested in the greatest field of all, Radio."

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J. E. Smith

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Do you want to make more money? Broadcasting stations employ engineers, operators, station managers and pay up to $5,000 a year. Spare time Radio set servicing pays as much as $200 to $500 a year—full time Radio servicing jobs pay as much as $80, $50, $75 a week. Many Radio Experts own their own full time or part time Radio businesses. Radio manufacturers and jobbers employ testers, inspectors, foremen, engineers, servicemen, paying up to $6,000 a year. Radio operators on ships get good pay and see the world besides. Automobile, police, aviation, commercial Radio and loud speaker systems offer good opportunities now and for the future. Television promises many good jobs soon. Men who have taken N. R. I. Training are holding good jobs in all these branches of Radio.

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Practically every neighborhood needs a good spare time serviceman. The day you enroll I start sending you Extra Money Job Sheets. They show you how to do Radio repair jobs that you can cash in on quickly. Throughout your training I send you plans and ideas that have made good spare time money for hundreds of fellows. I send you special Radio equipment and show you how to conduct experiments and build circuits which illustrate important Radio principles. My training gives you valuable, practical experience, while learning.

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J. E. SMITH, President
National Radio Institute,
Dept. 7GX1 Washington, D. C.

MAIL THIS NOW

FOR FREE BOOK OF FACTS ABOUT RADIO

J. E. SMITH, President, National Radio Institute, Dept. 7GX1, Washington, D. C.
Dear Mr. Smith: Without obligating me, send "Rich Rewards in Radio," which points out the spare time and full time opportunities in Radio and explains your 50-50 method of training men at home in spare time to become Radio Experts. (Please write plainly.)

Name..... Age.....
Address .....
City..... State.....

SPICY WESTERN STORIES

July, 1937 Vol. 2, No. 3

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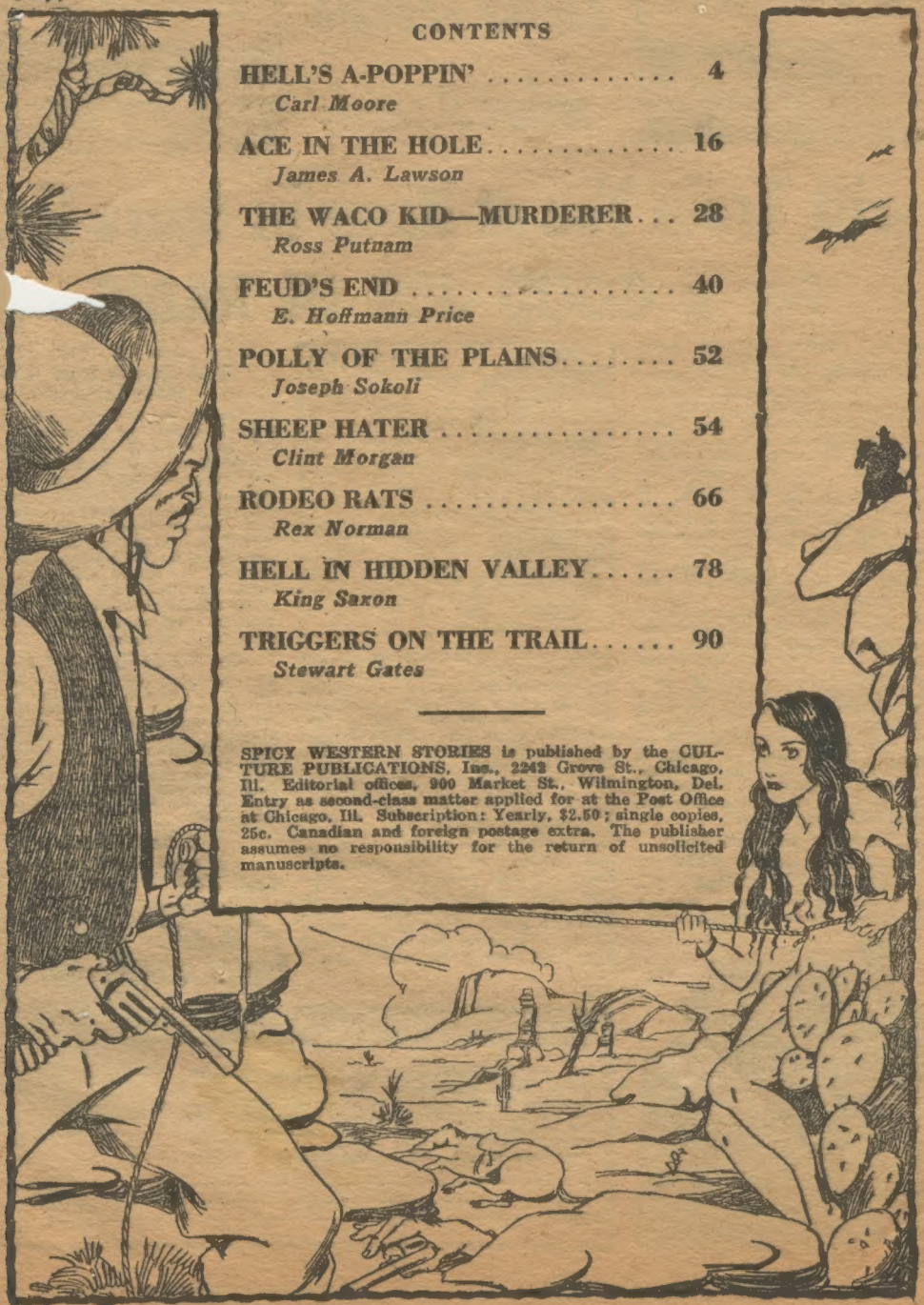

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Why put up with days . . . months . . . YEARS of discomfort, worry and fear? Learn now about this perfected invention for all forms of reducible rupture. Surely you keenly desire—you eagerly CRAVE to enjoy life's normal activities and pleasures once again. To work . . . to play . . . to live . . . to love . . . with the haunting Fear of Rupture banished from your thoughts! Literally *thousands* of rupture sufferers *have* entered this *Kingdom of Paradise Regained.* Why not you? Some wise man said, "Nothing is impossible in this world"—and it is true, for where others fail is where we have had our greatest success in many cases! Even doctors—thousands of them—have ordered for themselves and their patients. Unless your case is absolutely hopeless, *do not despair.* The coupon below brings our Free Rupture Book in plain envelope. Send the coupon now.

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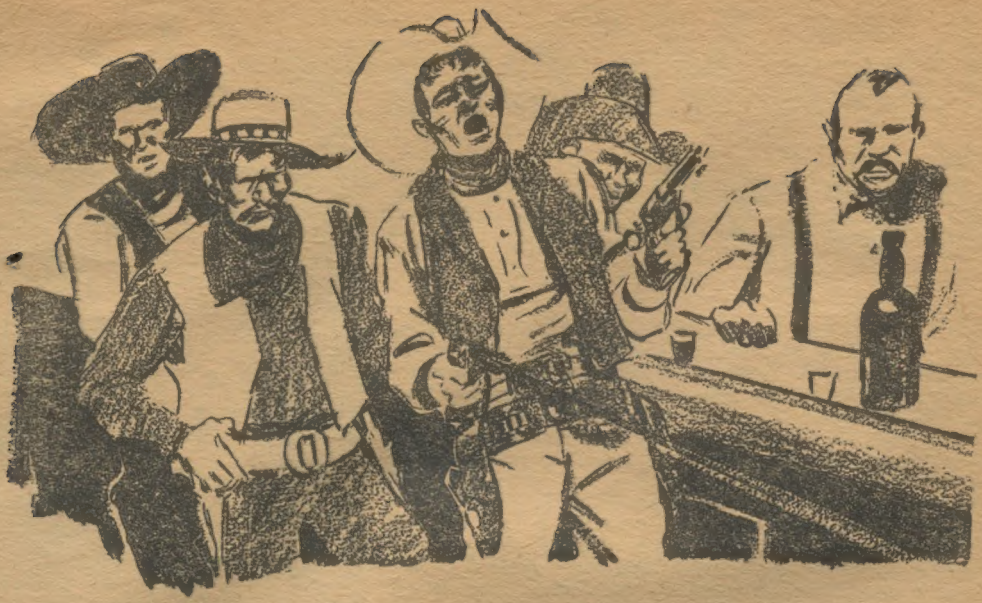
City----- *State*-----

State whether for Man----Woman----or Child----



HELL'S A-POPPIN'

IT wasn't just his clothes, although they were new enough to attract attention in any salty barroom. His Justins still gleamed and the heels were still unscuffed. His Stetson was still snow white, with never a spot, and his shirt and trousers could just as well have still borne a price mark. It was his guns that gave the outfit the lie. He wore a double gun rig, two cartridge belts, two holsters, all riveted together to form one piece, the leather oiled and well worn. The holsters weren't tied down but fitted tightly, high on his flat hips. And they were unusually shallow, both of them.

"Hmmmmm," mused Sheriff Higgins, "reg'lar gunnie's rig. Short barreled, matched guns, meanin' he likes to get in close. But what the hell's wrong with the jasper's face? He looks like he's been in a flour barrel."

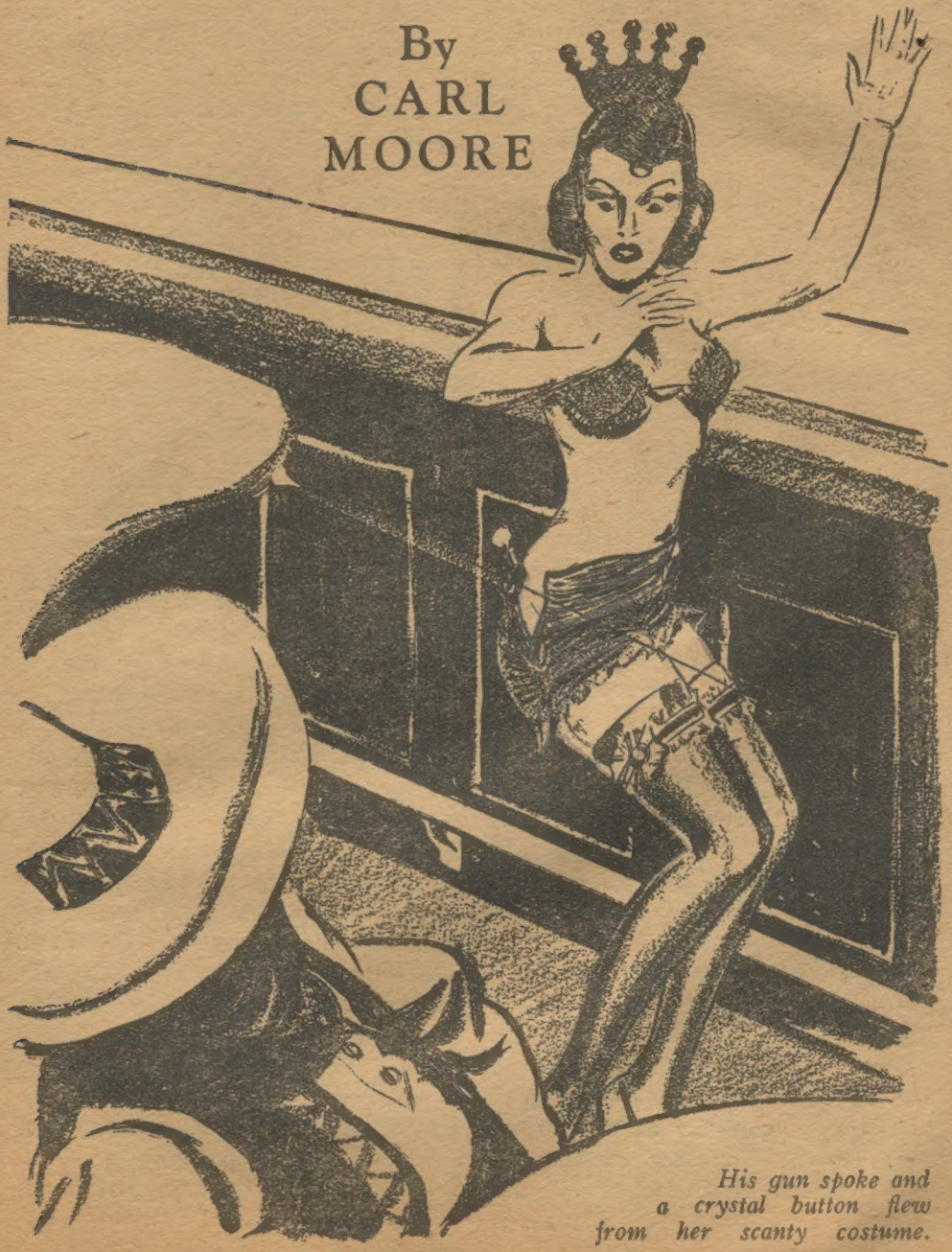
Pat Doyle, Number One man for the Syndicate, that owned practically the whole valley, laughed. "Looks to me like he might have been riding for the Huntsville outfit. Maybe you better look him up, sheriff."

The state penitentiary was at Huntsville.

MOLLY MAINE had been watching the big stranger ever since he drifted into the *Casita*. Strangers were Molly's meat, and this one fascinated her. Something about the lithe, catlike

Name? John Doe. Business? Spur Dragger. And he boasted that he could ride better, shoot better, drink better, and love better than any man in that hard-bitten Western town! Only the Widow Larsen dared call his bluff

By
CARL
MOORE



His gun spoke and a crystal button flew from her scanty costume.

movements of his slim body, the bold, challenging way he stared about. And the fact that a whiskey bottle and a water glass stood before him, that the water glass, filled to the brim, was his drink.

She caught his stare in the mirror and smiled with red lips. Slowly, deliberately, she leaned over, raised the hem of her dress and tugged at long, silk stockings. Nonchalantly she straightened, reached inside her low cut bodice to adjust a brassiere strap that wasn't there. Then, preening herself so that her white breasts threatened to spring from the bodice, she walked toward him, hands on hips, hips that swayed seductively, promisingly.

"Buy me a drink, cowboy?"

Before she could say another word his hands sank into the soft flesh beneath her arms, swung her from the floor and seated her with a thump on the bar. The short skirt rose high, the circle of flesh above her stocking tops gleamed pink and alluring. He called for another water glass, filled it to the brim and thrust it into her hand, his eyes mocking.

"There's your drink, lady," he grinned, "and see that you drink it all." Sinewy fingers sank deep into the soft flesh above her knee. She winced, saw the mockery in his eyes and drank, gulped until every drop of the raw whiskey had disappeared. She managed a smile.

"What's your name, tough guy?"

He didn't answer her, but turned his back and hung his elbows on the bar. "Listen, all of you rannies," he boomed, and the clatter died away in the *Casita*. "Me, I got word for all of you, so gather round. You been watching me like a bunch of hawks ever since I rode into this man's town. Which same is all right with me. But I want to satisfy your curiosity. My name? John Doe, don't forget it? Business? I'm a spur dragger. I drag my spurs where I please and when I please!" His eyes never left the circle of faces about him. He was challenging, daring, coaxing some one of the listeners to make a move. "I can ride better, shoot better, drink better, and love better than any man in town. Does anybody doubt my word?"

His eyes were pinpoints of flame as they darted about the circle. He leaned forward slightly, his elbows still high, his fingers slightly curved above his gun butts. And the challenge went unanswered. Even the sheriff went on picking his teeth. John Doe turned contemptuously, as if disappointed, said, "Give 'em all a drink, bartender."

He picked Molly Maine off the bar, headed toward the stairs, and thirty pair of eyes watched them go uncertainly. Cochineal was a tough town, but this waddy had called it, and gotten away with it! At the head of the stairs he said, "which is your room, sister?"

Once in the room, she lit the lamp, turned to find him glaring at her. She put a hand on his shoulder, tried to push herself against him. "Don't you like me, big boy? What's wrong?"

"When I buy a horse, I always look him over first." His white hands suddenly tore the dress from her shoulders, dropped it in a crumpled heap at her feet. Startled, she tried to stagger back, but he caught her by the shoulder and held her. His eyes were cold contemptuous, as he swept them over her swaying breasts, full hips and powdered thighs, so white in the lamplight. He turned her completely around, as a man putting a horse through its paces.

He reached in his pocket, tossed something on the dresser. "Five years is a long time, sister." His voice was cold.

"Turn out the lamp." When she walked sinuously to the lamp, she saw the coin he had thrown was a silver half dollar. But she was afraid to protest and soon the room was in darkness. . . .

An hour later he was back at the bar drinking his whiskey, but Molly Maine didn't appear again that night.

TWO o'clock in the morning. The Widow Larsen, sole owner of the Larsen House, Cochineal's only hotel, was aroused from deep slumber by a stentorian pounding on the lower door and a hoarse voice shouting in the street. Wearily she arose. The moonlight filtering through the window illuminated the lines of her huge body perfectly. The Widow Larsen was an even six feet in height, weighed one hundred sixty-five solid pounds. But the widow was proportioned so perfectly that a man usually forgot her size. Her bosom was large, but so perfectly in accord with her broad hips and column-like thighs, that no one noticed particularly. Her hair was as blonde and wild as that of a Viking, her complexion like Dresden china.

She thrust her head out of the window, yelled, "What do you want?"

"We got a customer for you, Missus Larsen, only he's kinda sick. Where shall we put him."

Three minutes later she held the door to Room 12 wide while two tottering cowhands toted a limp form up the steps and into the room. They placed him on the white bed, Stetson, guns, boots and all, and turned to go. The widow held the lamp high, peered at the white face of the man on the bed. "What's the matter with him and who is he?"

"Well, Missus Larsen," said one of the cowhands apologetically, "the sheriff said to bring him over and get him a room. He ain't no friend of our'n but he's a right tolerable ranny, name of John Doe. He was at the *Casita* and was sorta, well, suddenly taken drunk."

She was still peering at the white face on the bed when the two left the room on tiptoe. They could tell by the glare in her eye, the rapid rise and fall of her breasts, that the widow was about to throw a tantrum. The town of Cochineal respected the tantrums of the Widow Larsen.

She sat the lamp down on the dresser, muttering to herself angrily. She jerked the white Stetson from John Doe's head, started to throw it in a corner, then hung it on a nail. He lay like a dead man while she pulled off his new boots. Slowly her fingers slid toward the buckle of his gun belt. As she slid the tongue from the first hole it was as if a steel spring had suddenly uncoiled. He hit the floor in a crouch, one of the short guns miraculously in either hand, his eyes glaring and mad.

"What the hell!" he began, then slowly straightened, grinning wryly. "A woman! By God, another dame. Listen, you," he snarled, "I didn't send for you, but—you know what?" his voice was a taunt, a sneer. His eyes were sweeping over the curves of her big body, perfectly outlined by the lamp behind her. The guns slid slowly back into the oiled holsters. "I don't like women," his voice was thick, unsteady. "They're only good for one thing, lady. And I'm a careful man. A horse or a woman, I always like to see what I'm buying."

His hand shot out, the muslin gown ripped, fell to the floor. Amazed, she stood before him, blue veined breasts rising and falling, entire body quivering with growing anger under her chemise as he swept his eyes over what he could see of her pink and white perfection.

"Hmmmmm," he grinned, "not bad, not bad." He reached for her.

The Widow Larsen's right fist came up in a two foot arc, exploded against John Doe's jaw. His eyes went glassy, he crumpled inward like a concertina, hit the floor with a thump. For a moment she glared at him, then stooped and unbuckled the gun belt, laid it on the dresser. She picked him up, dropped him on the bed and pulled a quilt over him. At the door, majestic in her seminudity, she turned back, a puzzled look in her eye. "The damned ranny," she muttered and went down the hall smiling.

ON Friday evening, after he had been in Cochineal five days, John Doe got out of bed and lit the lamp. His mouth tasted like the bottom of a parrot cage, his eyes were twin balls of fire. His huge, thin body trembled violently and he sat down again on the bed before going to the water pitcher. The water tasted cool and sweet in his burning stomach, felt equally cool on his beard-stubbled face. He raised the shade, stared down at the dusty street of a typical cowtown.

"Now," he asked himself, "just where in hell am I and why?" He saw his guns on the back of a chair, his boots beneath the bed. As he drew on the Justins, his bleary eye saw a dark shape in the corner. Wobbling closer, he began to swear. What the hell was his saddle doing in his room?

A tap at the door, followed by a booming knock. He called, "Yeah, yeah, come in. You want to split my head?"

The door opened. A blonde woman stood there, a woman fully as tall as John Doe, with high, majestic breasts, soft and yet arrogant beneath the tightness of her gingham dress. Those mounds of fascinating flesh trembled indignantly as she walked in, glaring at John Doe, disapproval rank on her pink and white face.

His eyes swept over her appraisingly as she sat down in the rocker, crossed her legs with a flourish. She saw his gaze, tugged at the short dress, but not until he had seen the white circle of skin above her stocking tops.

"When are you going to get sober?" she demanded. "You been drunk five days."

"Well, now, ma'am. I don't see as it's any of your—Who are you, anyway?"

Her lips set primly. "I'm the Widow Larsen. I own this hotel, young man!"

His eyes grew speculative, he fumbled in his pocket for tobacco and papers. There was a taunt in his voice that brought a flush to her cheeks. "You know, I'm right sorry to hear that. Because I just been going through my pockets and I find I haven't got a thin dime left. What do you know about that, Missus Larsen?"

The rocker creaked on and on while she glared at him. His match flared, smoke trickled lazily from his nostrils. "Say, what's my saddle doing in my room, lady?"

She snorted. "Where do you want to keep it? You ain't got no horse. You sold him to the bartender last night for four quarts of whiskey."

He lay back on the bed and laughed grimly, sardonically, while she jumped up from the chair. "What are you trying to do, drink yourself to death?" she demanded. "You'd have sold your guns for another quart if it hadn't been for me, you fool!"

"For you?" He sat up quickly.

"Certainly, you bum, me! Who do you think has been pulling you out of the bar for the last five nights and seein'

"When I buy a horse. . . ." he began. Then went on, "Five years is a long time, sister."

you got to bed proper like? Who do you think—?"

His white face flushed. He could picture himself in a crowded bar, a two gun man, a man who threw a wide loop, who had definite ideas about women. He could picture this blonde woman, huge and masterful, coming in to take him by the ear and drag him out! Him! But he looked at her and laughed and his voice was grim.

"Seems like we might as well be married, Missus Larsen. You taking care of me and all. You right sure we ain't? You see I don't remember much about the last few days. Maybe I been working my board bill out?"

HE didn't know himself why he did it. Maybe because anger touched her coloring with highlights, maybe because the light gleamed on blonde hair until it looked like spun gold.

He laughed a little breathlessly as his arms went about her, as he drew her

close with sinewy muscles. Her breasts flattened against his chest, her body was warm and soft in his embrace. His thin-lipped mouth found hers and for a moment her own lips parted, a tremulous sigh escaped her. Her hand was on the back of his neck when she suddenly stiffened. A hard heel came down on his instep. He released her, stepped back, just in time to run into that same right hook. He lit on the bed on his back, bounced off and sat down hard on the floor, rubbing his jaw.

After a moment, he arose ruefully, rubbing his jaw. "Well," he sighed admiringly, "that settles the marriage question. A man can always make mistakes."

He buckled on his guns, put on the Stetson jauntily and picked up the saddle.

"Where you going?" she grated.

"To sell the kak," his voice was mild as he tried to sidle around her. "Maybe I can get four quarts for it, too."

He had almost made off with the saddle when she threw it into the corner. "Listen, you drunk," she was almost roaring, "You're going to get sober, see? You got a note from Milt Cross offering you a job if you'll meet him and you're going to do it!"

She thrust a hand into her bosom, handed him a folded bit of paper.

"Reading my mail, huh, God, what a woman."

"It was open," she defended herself, as he unfolded the note and read.

"John Doe: If you want to make some easy money, meet me at the Okay Corral at nine o'clock and we'll talk it over. I've been watching your gunwork at the saloon. Milt Cross."

"Who's he?"

"He's all right. He owns the Four Points, farther down the valley. Too big for the Syndicate to run out. He's a fighter."

"What does he mean about my gunwork? I ain't shot anybody, have I?"

"You been putting on a fancy exhibition with those guns of yours every night. Last night Molly Maine was giving a hootch dance and you shot a crystal button off her tights. Burned her a little, but she's been burned before, I reckon. Now you get yourself shaved, and I'll rustle you some grub. Then you can meet Milt and see what he wants."

AT NINE o'clock John Doe was walking down Cochineal's only side street toward the Okay Corals. His boots clumped along the wooden sidewalk, a quirly gleamed redly from between his lips. He wanted a drink pretty badly, but he smiled to himself and remembered the wrath of the Widow Larsen. Might be better to take this Milt Cross job and get the hell out of Cochineal! He touched his sore jaw tentatively.

The street was dark and deserted, the sky was cloudy, the moon hidden. The corral loomed in the distance, just across the alley. He stepped off the wooden step, and just as a jungle beast will, sensed danger. He lunged forward, threw out his arm, heard the hiss of something flying through the air and felt a sharp throb of pain as a knife buried itself an inch deep in the fleshy part of his arm. He leaped the alley swiftly, ran through the corral and circled to his left. He was just in time to see a dark figure peering about the corner toward the corral. The stingy gun leaped into his hand, laced the darkness with orange. The dark figure plunged forward on its face.

A second later Doe was on his knees beside it, an expression of surprise on his lean face. "Damned if it ain't a woman!" he ejaculated, and noted with

the aid of a match that his bullet had merely creased her scalp. He picked her up grimly, took her back the way he had come, making for the hotel. The Widow Larsen was not in sight. Soon the girl was stretched out on John Doe's bed.

"By God," he muttered, "heaving hardware and her only a baby!" He washed off her wound, unbuttoned the shirt half way down and bathed her upper body. Her breasts were small, almost boyish, and firm and warm. A wave of sympathy shot over him, but a sardonic look reappeared in his eye as it swept across her body, noting the gentle flare of her hips, the curving sleekness of her thighs in the worn levis. "Not such a baby after all," he muttered. Philosophically he peeled the shirt from his wounded arm, staunched the dribbling blood. "She owes me something, sure enough," he said aloud. "Heaving knives at strangers is bad business, and I always said women wasn't good for much. Still, when I buy a horse, I look at it first and—"

He pulled at the open shirt, yanked at free of the girl's leather belt. For a moment he peered down at her white loveliness with hungry eyes. And then a voice behind him said, "Ain't you ashamed! What you doing with Sue Torrey in your room?"

Sure, it was the Widow Larsen, eyes blazing with anger as she thrust him aside and leaned over the girl. "A sweet girl like her and a bum like you!"

Doe tossed the knife in a gleaming parabola. "Sweet girl, hell! She was laying for me in an alley and tossed this shiv into my arm, when I went past."

Sue Torrey struggled erect. "I did not, liar. I was waiting for Milt Cross when you passed. Someone ahead of me rose up and threw the knife, then ran. That's all I know. Why should I knife you? Although I ought to stick a knife in every one in this town!" She leaned over, began to sob. And it was the Widow Larsen who explained.

THE Torrey's had owned the TTT, on the opposite side of Milt Cross' Four Point Ranch, for years. Old man Torrey had always been a notoriously poor manager and gradually through hard luck and bank mortgages, had lost most of his holdings. Yet stubbornly he had held on to his remaining few hundred acres, although the Syndicate, run by Patrick Doyle and his right hand bower, Carroll, had tried every means of getting his ranch. Cattle had been run off, a waterhole had been poisoned. Three weeks before, old T. T. Torrey had been killed in a gunfight by Carroll, the Syndicate gunman, and Sheriff Higgins hadn't even arrested him! It was the old, old set-up of the land hungry capitalists using any means to sate their appetites.

"And now," the girl sobbed, "the boys have all quit. I don't blame them. Carroll and his gang rode out yesterday and scared them. Nobody wants to be killed. Milt Cross is the only one big enough to fight them. That's why I came in tonight, because he sent me this note."

John Doe read it curiously.

"Darling: Meet me in town tonight in the alley behind the Okay Corral. I think I have a plan to wipe out Doyle and the others. Milt."

Doe said, "Looks a good deal like mine, and something stinks. Where does Cross come in?" His eyes were sweeping over the white expanse of the girl's body. Her breasts quivered as she sobbed, her body gleamed in the lamplight. John Doe hadn't seen many women like this. His eyes were glittering.

She answered, "He wants to marry me, says if we combine the two ranches

we can keep the Syndicate out. But I promised dad I'd stick to the end, and I will!"

Doe grated to the widow. "Get the kid home, Missus Larsen, get her started now. Hell's gonna pop in this town. I hate skunks and bad smells."

FIVE minutes later they were alone. The widow shook her head. "Nope, Milt Cross woudn't have no point in doing a thing like that. He loves the kid. But it does look funny, don't it."

Doe turned from the window. "Funny! I spend five days showing this town what a trick shot I am. They pull something like this for one reason. They get the girl in the alley and someone throws a knife at me. I'm lightning with a gun. They thought I'd blast away at her and get her. Thank God, I only creased her! What a goat I'd be! Well," he slapped his guns, "I got to go places."

She nodded her head. "I suppose you got to, John." Her eyes were filled with tears, her entire body swaying with emotion. "You won't have much chance if you're going to buck Doyle and Carrol. The sheriff's their man, and a dozen others. But you got to do it, that's all. If you get away, make for the side window. It drops into the alley. Your horse will be waiting at the end of the alley."

His hands were on her shoulders. She nodded. "Yes, John, I couldn't see you sell him for liquor. I bought him back."

His voice was husky. "I ain't much good, Missus Larsen; you know that. I did five years in the pen for losing my head over a woman, and I promised myself I'd get even with the whole damn' female species. I see now I was wrong. I never had no trouble compared to that poor kid that just left. I never saw a woman like her, so little and soft and sweet." She looked at him curiously, tried to turn away. But he caught her shoulders, held her close to him and kissed her mouth. "I guess this is all, Missus Larsen," he said, and went out the door.

She watched for a minute, heard him on the stairs, then went to the mirror. Little and soft and sweet? She laughed in her own face, laughed bitterly.

HE leaned with his elbows on the bar and looked around the room casually. Doyle, the Syndicate man, played poker in the corner, his killer, Carroll, lounging against the wall behind him. Halfway up the room Sheriff Higgins dozed in a chair, his belly in his lap.

Doe's voice boomed out, "Gentlemen, at ease." Silence answered him. He laughed. "You've been watching me make a fool of myself for the last week, gentlemen, but I'm serious tonight. Maybe some of you think I'm a killer because I'm a dead shot. All right, I am. But I'm not a woman killer. Higgins, listen!"

He related what had happened in the alley by the corral. Higgins shook his head, apparently bewildered. Doe said bitterly, "So whoever wrote the notes—and it wasn't Milt Cross—expected me to murder a woman. Me! A woman killer!"

The sheriff started to speak, but Carroll broke in smoothly, softly. "And who do you think wrote the notes, stir bug? Who do you think knifed you?" He was moving slowly toward the lounging Doe, eyes slots of malevolence. To Doe's right another man, equally hard faced, slid down the bar.

The sheriff got up from his chair, began edging for the door. Behind the bar the bartender went down, an inch at a time, to disappear entirely with a scut-

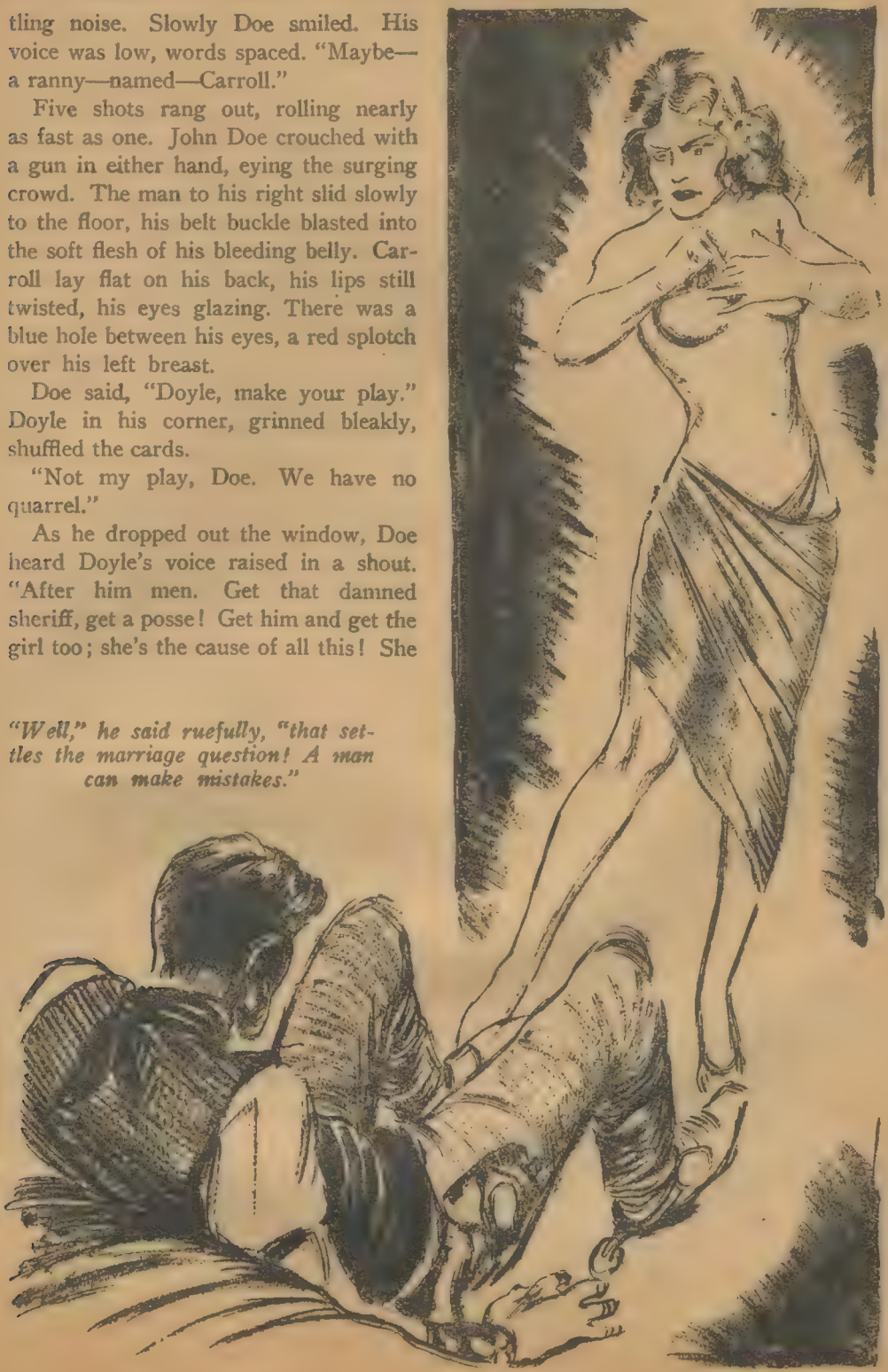
tling noise. Slowly Doe smiled. His voice was low, words spaced. "Maybe—a ranny—named—Carroll."

Five shots rang out, rolling nearly as fast as one. John Doe crouched with a gun in either hand, eying the surging crowd. The man to his right slid slowly to the floor, his belt buckle blasted into the soft flesh of his bleeding belly. Carroll lay flat on his back, his lips still twisted, his eyes glazing. There was a blue hole between his eyes, a red splotch over his left breast.

Doe said, "Doyle, make your play." Doyle in his corner, grinned bleakly, shuffled the cards.

"Not my play, Doe. We have no quarrel."

As he dropped out the window, Doe heard Doyle's voice raised in a shout. "After him men. Get that damned sheriff, get a posse! Get him and get the girl too; she's the cause of all this! She



"Well," he said ruefully, "that settles the marriage question! A man can make mistakes."

must have framed that knifing so he'd look for revenge, damn her."

DOE was swearing to himself as he leaped into the saddle and clattered away into the night. The white dusty road smoked beneath him. It was good to be in the saddle again, even though he knew a posse was close behind. A late moon peered from behind a cloud as he rattled into the wrecked corral of the TTT ranch. There was no light in the house. He hammered on the door.

"Who is it?" A frightened quavering voice.

She was in a thin nightdress when she let him in, lamp in hand. Hastily he threw a blanket about her, explaining briefly as he put her in the saddle and sprang up behind her. They made the bluff, crouched among the jackpines and dwarf cedar and watched the scene below. The posse appeared, the men scattered. Suddenly a shot blazed out, followed by others. They could hear the bullets rattling through the board shack.

"They never even warned you," gasped the girl. Doe shook his head grimly. Suddenly he was conscious of the warm, thinly clad body pressed so closely against his, conscious of the fact that she was trembling.

"I'll take care of you," he muttered, and held her close. Presently the posse below started back to town, but John Doe was still holding the girl in his arms. He had never known a woman like her; she had never known a man like him. Fire was in their veins, consuming, unreasonable. Her lips were vibrant beneath his; her white arms were steel bands to pull him closer until his own thick chest crushed her soft breasts. The sleazy gown slipped from her shoulders unheeded. John Doe, ex-convict, gunsharp, groaned a little and couldn't help it. . . .

THE sun was a fuzzy, lemon colored ball peering over the eastern range when they went back to the TTT. He caught a horse, saddled it, and told her goodbye.

"Go to Milt Cross, honey," he said, a catch in his voice. "He loves you, I guess, and he'll take care of you."

"What will you do?"

"Hit the hills again. The old owlhoot trail." His voice was bitter. He looked away as he said, "I'm sorry for what happened a while ago, miss."

"I'll never, never, be sorry." She leaned from the horse, kissed him quickly, and was gone.

For three days John Doe rode the malpais and the brakes with a posse close on his heels. He knew that if he were captured a crooked judge and a packed jury would give him short shrift. On the night of the third day he slipped back into Cochineal.

The Widow Larsen let him in the back and said, "It's about time you showed up. Hell's a popping in this man's town!"

"What is it now?"

"Nothing, nothing," sarcastically, "only they got Sue Torrey in jail for harboring a fugitive. Milt Cross tried to fight for her; got two of the posse and he's in jail, too. Listen." She opened the front door. From down the main street came the muttering and roaring of a mob. "That's Doyle's idea," she went on bitterly. "He don't intend to wait for law. He's got the mob worked to a lynching fever and of course the sheriff won't stand in his way. Where you going?"

"To the jail," snapped John Doe and was gone before she could prevent him.

He skirted the corner where the mob milled about. The jail square was deserted. He walked straight across the square toward the deputy at the door. "Hey," growled the man, and started to level his carbine. It was the last move he made for a long while. John Doe took the keys from his prostrate form, and opened the door. Down the corridor he saw a light, tiptoed toward it.

Sheriff Higgins, fat and perspiring, stood before a cell, supporting the almost nude figure of Sue Torrey. Blood dribbled from her lips, trickled down across the whiteness of her bosom, congealed redly on quivering flesh. The sheriff laughed, shook her again. "I thought you'd sign, Cross, when you got a taste of what they'd do to the girl. Here!" He thrust a paper through the bars.

A man's voice quavered, "Don't hurt her any more. I'll sign. You can have it all, anything I've got, only don't hurt her."

The sheriff said, "Hurry up. The mob's coming. If they get her, you know how she'll die. It won't be pretty!" He shook her again, slapped her hard.

Doe said, "Don't sign it, Cross."

The sheriff whirled, held the girl in front of him and reached for his gun. Doe waited till it was pointed at him, then shot it out of the sheriff's hand. The fat man dropped the girl, leaped back. Another bullet tore out his left eye, another thudded into his fat belly. Quickly John Doe unlocked the cell door, released Milt Cross.

"Hurry," he panted, "the mob's coming."

LIKE a great beast the surging mob swirled into the jail square. From the barred windows John Doe picked off man after man, shooting at the splashes of orange flame that laced the night. At another window Milt Cross, grim lipped fired in the same manner.

The firing ceased. Cross said weakly, "Much obliged, fella, but I guess we're done for. They'll blast us out somehow."

Doe answered, "And we'll take a lot of them to hell when we go, stout fellow!"

"Doe, Doe!" The voice of Doyle from the darkness. "You got three minutes to come out. We'll give you a fair trial. Three minutes is all."

"Trial, hell," jeered John Doe. "The only trial I want is to shoot it out with you! Call off your dogs, I'll step out and you meet me. We'll shoot it out, just you and me?"

"Doyle! Doyle!" Came a woman's hoarse voice. On the edge of the building opposite, torch in hand, stood the Widow Larsen. The wind outlined her magnificent figure, moulded her dress about columnar thighs, full hips, proud breasts. In her arm she held a bundle of yellow sticks.

"It's dynamite, Doyle, enough to blow the square to hell! It's capped, fused! John Doe, open the door and come out. Doyle, you're going to meet him! And the first move that's unfair will bring this stuff down on all of you."

Men began to slip away into the shadows, to run as soon as the shadows covered them. Doe said, "So long, Cross, I'm going."

He opened the door, slid out and crouched, guns still sheathed. "Have a shot, skunk," he taunted and peered into the darkness. As soon as the words left his mouth, he fell sidewise. A gun boomed from the blackness of the square. Doe threw ten shots at the flash, circling it completely.

Somebody said, "Godamighty, he

(Continued on page 107)

ACE IN

They found Sam dead at the waterhole, plugged in the back. Could this cute, cuddly kid be a killer? Frosty wondered. And worse, was she trying to pin the the job on her own brother?

FROSTY KEE pulled the match away from his cigarette and canted his head. There was no mate to the gunshot sound that, it seemed to Frosty, had come from over the rolling rise ahead.

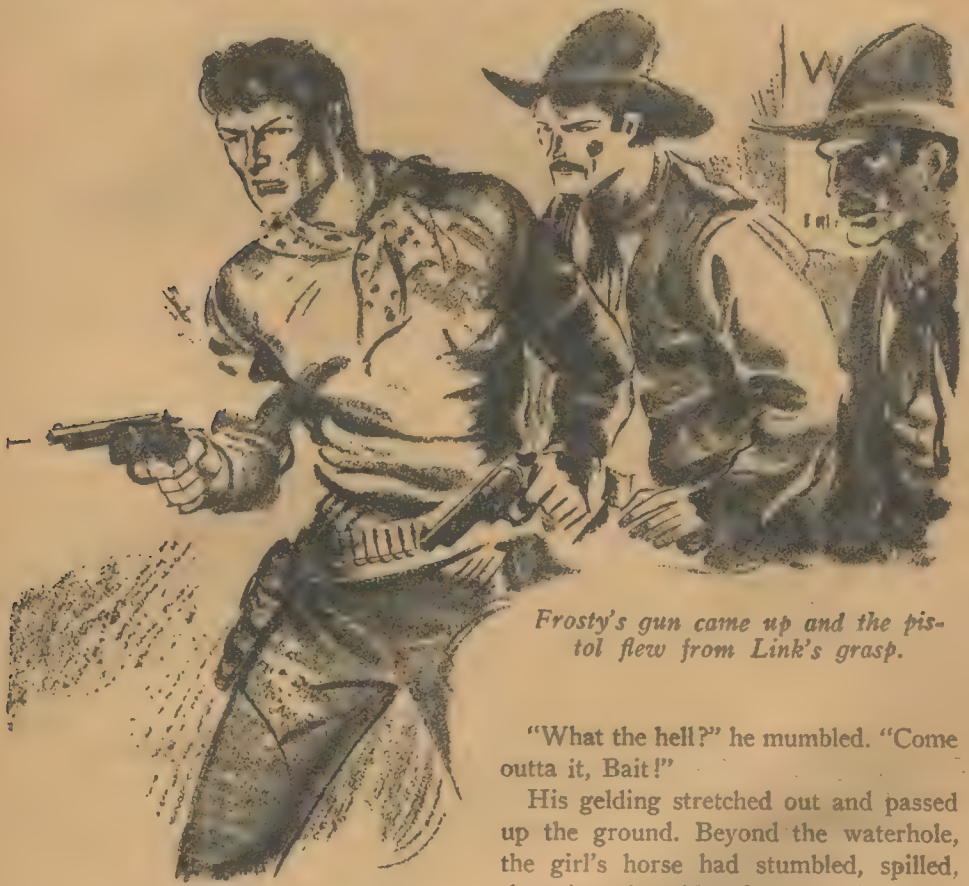
He shrugged, lit his smoke, and picked up his reins. It was early yet and he was in no hurry. Wampole, Montana, lay a hundred miles beyond this Wyoming range. Why rush? According to information received back in One Step, he'd find grub and a bunk at the Goblet. He aimed to hunker there tonight.

He skylined the rise. Just below, willows marked the site of a pool, fenced in. A tall windmill and water tanks were to one side. Frosty set that shot down to someone shooting a varmint at the waterhole, and looked to see what he might see not overly curious.

A grunt broke past his lips, unpeeling

THE HOLE

By JAMES A. LAWSON



Frosty's gun came up and the pistol flew from Link's grasp.

his smoke and letting the tobacco dribble on his lap. A girl—and no mistaking that—plunged her horse out of the deep willows and raced away to the north. And the eyes of Frosty took on that filmed, cold flame that had helped get him his brand.

The girl's hair, golden in the sunlight, flew back. Her shirt-tail popped behind her in the urgency of this ride. Frosty could see she had bare feet thrust into the stirrups, and there seemed to be clothing under one arm.

"What the hell?" he mumbled. "Come outta it, Bait!"

His gelding stretched out and passed up the ground. Beyond the waterhole, the girl's horse had stumbled, spilled, throwing the rider far over its head. She rolled, and the bundle under her arm scattered over the shortgrass. The horse got up, shook, stood eying its mistress. The girl moved a little. Lay still again.

THE gelding reared and Frosty was was out of the saddle, running awkwardly to kneel beside the girl. She lay still, looking up at him, her blue eyes wide with something more of fear than pain. Stunned by the fall, yet not knocked out.

Frosty raised her, kneeling as he was, and braced one arm around her. She sobbed for breath. But not half so hard as Frosty Kee. He felt a warm dampness from her little body, through the damp shirt. The front of that man's shirt had been only halfway buttoned, and the rising, round, white curves peeping out made Frosty tingle almost painfully.

Her damp waist overalls showed the slender, flowing outlines that lure kings off their thrones, make sane men mad, and madmen berserk beasts. Frosty leaned lower, lower over her, as though a magnet drew him toward the bee-stung red lips. He had known a lot of women in his time, and had been very casual about it. Now, however, there was nothing casual in his feeling about this girl.

She caught her breath, sat forward. Her lips trembled and she scrambled to her feet. "Th-thank you," she managed. "I'm all right now."

She sensed his eyes riveted to that gaping shirt. One hand came up, drew it together. Frosty sighed. "Reckon," he moaned, "they *ain't* nothin' to be done when they's a 'mustn't touch' sign on things."

A faint smile brushed her lips, then fled before that look of fear again. Frosty turned. He began picking up the things she had dropped. Her boots, tiny socks, a bath towel. His hand crushed a stamp-sized bit of blue silk. He'd like this for a souvenier. But he allowed there was no use in a souvenier when a ranny hadn't even the sample of a kiss.

He handed the girl her clothing, reserving the blue silk until the last. He draped it on one finger and held it out. A little frown crossed his lean face. A long strip had been torn out of those, as Frosty mentally put it, "button britches."

"Want to put these on now?" he hopefully suggested.

The girl sat down and was pulling on her boots. She looked up. "I'm not *that* grateful—for your buttin-in," she snapped.

"Well, I'll leave you to your own devices, as they say," Frosty grunted. He'd sure like to teach her a lesson, by damn! He started for his horse. The girl jumped up.

"Wait!" her voice held terror. "Where you going?"

"Back to that waterhole, to water my horse and take a look around," he said, one foot in the stirrup. The girl's next move took him with the effect of a hard sock on the jaw. She leaped toward him, grabbed him, spun him around. Her arms went up and around his neck; her lips were warm, crushing against his own; she nestled against him and a strange, odd numbness ran over Frosty from head to foot. He gasped for breath when the girl stepped back.

"Now," she panted. "Now, you don't want to go to that water, do you? Please!"

"More than ever," Frosty gulped. "I'm burning up!"

"It's none of your business, I tell you." She was frantic. "None at all! Stay away from there. Oh, if I hadn't lost my gun, I'd shoot you. Mind your own business, stranger. You hear?"

"The hearing ain't so good. I'm a passing pilgrim. I'm close to something that don't look right. I got to investigate to protect myself. And I reckon," his voice became grimly stubborn, "you'll come along with me."

She wilted, pressing her hands to her face. "I can't stand it!" she cried.

Frosty took her arm and led her toward the water hole.

SHE commenced trembling when he half dragged her through the willows. Frosty came up short, then bent his lean form forward. A man lay face down just at the willow's edge. His head hung over the little rocked-up bank of the overflow pool, and one hand was dangling in the clear water. There was a damp stain, a tiny hole in the back of his shirt.

"In the back; right where the suspenders cross!" Frosty exclaimed. He turned on the girl. "Who are you? And what did he do to you, to cause you to plug him like this?"

She pulled back, shaking her head violently. "I didn't, I didn't," she cried. "And you've no right to question me."

"No?" dryly. "I got to protect myself, ain't I?"

He let go of her, then. Walked over a bit. There were the tracks of a horse outside the barbed wire around the pool. And a bit of blue silk—the missing strip from her scanties—hanging on the wire.

"If you didn't plug him, you sure was convicting yourself," Frosty grunted, pocketing that bit of silk. He roved on around the pool. He stopped, looking up a winding ravine that Spring overflows had cut. It was at a slight angle to the dead man. Frosty went through that fence and up this watercourse. He stopped, bent, swore softly. There were tracks of a shod horse here. They were fresh, leading out to the hard-baked range soil. He lost them there, and came back to the girl.

"I'm maybe beginning to believe you," he said. "Maybe you didn't plug him. And maybe, if you'll tell me who you are and who he is, I can help you out."

He led her back toward the horses. And in a burst of words the girl sobbed: "I'm Janet Tarrant. My brother owns the Goblet spread. That dead man is Sam Bowder. He and his brother own the 7-Bar-11 outfit, to the north. They're half-brothers, I mean. I came out here for a little swim. My brother and the boys weren't at the ranch. I was swimming. I heard a shot, and Sam Bowder came plunging out of the willows, like you saw him. I didn't know he was within miles of the pool!"

"I can imagine," Frosty agreed. "He was peeping. He ever bother you?"

THEY mounted, rode on. She nodded. "Yes. Not long ago, he came across me on the range. Tried to make love to me. He thought all women fell for him. Like some of those women in One Step. I beat him off with a quirt. Some of the boys were riding my way, and saw it. They told my brother. He cornered Sam in One Step, gave him a fist-whipping, and said he'd kill him if he ever bothered me again."

"And you think—?"

"No! Bill— my brother—couldn't have. He wouldn't."

"Ummn," Frosty thought. Come to think of it, he'd seen nothing of the dead man's horse. Could those tracks in the ravine have been made by that animal, and the horse had broken away, frightened by the shot.

Was this cute, desirable bundle a killer, and turning the mess toward her brother? He damned the thought—but it persisted.

"Where'd you lose your gun?" he demanded abruptly.

"I don't know. I lost it several days ago. Either in town, or on the road back."

"What sort of gun?"

"A pearl-handled .38, with my initials inlaid on the buttplates. What has that to do with—?"

"Nothing," Frosty answered. "But I think you'd better tell your brother. He sort of ought to know."

"You're high-handed for a stranger!" she snapped. "I don't even know who you are."

"The name," he said, watching her narrowly, "is Frosty Kee. I'm just riding through, to Wampole, up in Montana."

"Frosty? Kee? Why! you're the man—the gunman—who hires out in cattle wars. A killer!"

"Ummm. I hire out in cow wars—to settle them both ways. I got more than one Cattle Association backing me. And that killer business—don't get ideas this Sam Bowder's kill can be laid to me. *I* don't *have* to shoot men in the back."

She was silent, shaken, he could see, the rest of the way to the Goblet. A goodish-sized outfit, judged by numbers of the cattle they passed and the amount of buildings they now brought up. Save for one horse standing hip-shot by the house, no one seemed to be around.

They went inside and Janet Tarrant called. A man answered, and came out into the long hall. He was as tall as Frosty, and clean appearing. He, Frosty decided, would never shoot a man in the back. Anyhow, men who did never gave warning beforehand.

"Bill!" Janet cried. "Something dreadful has happened. I was swimming at the waterhole. Heard a shot—" She explained.

Bill Tarrant frowned. "Janet, are you sure—?"

"You know I wouldn't, Bill," she cried.

He seemed to notice Frosty for the first time. "Who're you?" he demanded.

Frosty explained himself. Bill's eyes narrowed. "You've got the name of being a hard case, Kee. But square. I—hell!" He shook his head bewilderedly. And looked at his sister in an undecided manner.

Hoofbeats sounded in the yard. Bill Tarrant leaned and looked out the door. His face went pale beneath his tan. "It's Link Bowder and Ed Tate, the sheriff," he croaked. He turned desperately to Janet. "No matter what—you keep still. You weren't at that waterhole at all. You'll ball things up if you say you were. And you, Kee—I'm begging you to keep shut."

Frosty shrugged. After all, it was no real business of his.

BILL TARRANT opened the door. Frosty put all of his attention on the two men here. Tate, he rightly decided, was all right. And Link Bowder, now sole owner of the 7-Bar-11, was a hell of a long way from being all right! A bullet-headed, big man with little eyes and an animal appetite showing on his loose face. He let his eyes rest on Janet—and that hungry gaze seemed to strip the clothes from her.

"Seems he was expectin' us, Tate," Bowder growled.

"Expecting nothing," Bill grunted. "What's up?"

"If you don't know, Bill," Tate said regretfully, "it's Sam Bowder. Found over by your waterhole, a shot in his back. You threatened to kill him, you know. I reckon, if you can explain—"

"How long ago was this Bowder found?" Frosty demanded.

"Who in hell are you?" Link rasped. "Kee? A gunnie, Tate."

"We just come by the waterhole," Tate said. "Link sent for me when Sam's horse come home alone."

"But you never knew, then, anything had happened, outside of Sam Bowder maybe being just set afoot. And you went ahead and called the sheriff," Frosty said thinly.

"What the hell's it to you?" Bowder snarled. "Tate, you better hold this hombre, along with Tarrant."

"I can't, rightly," Tate explained. "But, Kee, I'll have to ask you to be around. Maybe you know where Bill was this afternoon. They'll be an in-

"What did he do to you, that you had to plug him?" he snarled.

quest tomorrow. Bill, I'm sorry. You got to come along."

Bill Tarrant nodded. "But you'll have to prove I did him under," he growled, looking hard at Link Bowder. He eyed Frosty. "Sort of watch out for things," he requested. Frosty nodded.

WHEN they had ridden out for One Step, Janet bowed her head. Her slender shoulders shook. Frost laid a hand on one arm, and felt again the hot blood course swiftly in his veins. She turned to him in her misery, and his arms were around her.

He knew damned well neither she nor her brother had fired that shot. And he aimed to prove as much! He bent, tilted her head back and kissed her almost fiercely. The girl blinked at him, and her lips parted. He could hear the pace of her breathing increase rapidly.

"You got to trust me," he said.

"How—how do you mean?" her color ran red.

"Well, not in every way. I couldn't trust myself like that. I want you to tell me a few things. About Link and Sam Browder. How they got along, and all."

"They didn't," she answered. "Sam fancied himself a ladies' man. Link is a different type. Like Sam in some ways, though. Link never did bother me, openly. But the way he always looks at me—" she shivered. "Sam and Link always quarreled, too. They had a terrible fight when Sam caught me up out on the range."

Frosty picked up his hat. "I'll be taking a little ride," he said. "Be back sometime tonight."

"Where you going?" she was puzzled.

"They's an ace in every deck. I'm figuring on dealing us one. Your brother ain't sure—so he's protecting you. It would be hell for you to go to jail, I wouldn't wonder. And so it's up to me."

"But why should you?"

"Maybe to teach you a lesson. I don't know. Maybe because of—here!"

He swept her into his arms and felt her melt against him. This time, her own lips, moist, avid, responded to his own. "If—if you can straighten this out, Frosty Kee," she muttered, "it may be you can teach me a lesson."

He swallowed hard. "I better get," he blurted and wheeled out of the house.

IN One Step, Frosty went to the jail. He warned Bill to sit tight. The name of Frosty, with the fact he'd been ordered to stick around, made him an object of attention. He shrugged and headed for Pinto's Place, a saloon and gambling palace half way down the line of false-fronted buildings the little town contained.

The doors swung outward as Frosty stepped up, and he almost collided with Link Bowder. Link hesitated, scowled, and the hate that ran between these two men was that of men born to be fatal enemies.

Frosty stared, his eyes glittering. Bowder opened his mouth to speak, closed it, swung on up the walk. Frosty pushed on inside. He ignored the glances of the men in here. Talk buzzed on as knots of men discussed the killing of Sam and Bill's arrest.

A liquor-stupid puncher next to him said to another: "It seemed like Gilda was sure makin' a play for big brother Link. Awful eager, seein' Sam ain't cold yet."

"Cinch your blab," the other grunted. "Link ain't my idea of a good enemy. Friend either, for all of that."

Frosty downed his drink and turned. He looked at the woman who sat in a

far corner by herself, a glass of whiskey on the table before her. Frosty touched the drunk puncher. "Is that one Gilda?" he asked.

The man blinked at him. "Uh? Oh, sure. 'S Gilda Dort."

He stood staring after Frosty as the latter walked across, nodded down at Gilda and pulled out a chair. Deep, sullen eyes stared up at him. The tight bodice of the woman's dress outlined clearly mounds of white flesh at her breast. As he bent to pull the chair under him, Frosty glimpsed white skin above long silken stockings.

He reached for her bottle.

"Cowboy, just who invited you?" she demanded hotly.

"Why, you did." He smiled. "I'm known as being particular. I'm picking on you. Outside of that, my name's Frosty Kee."

Her eyes narrowed. "The gunner Tate told to stick around, eh? All right, Kee. Maybe we *can* do business. Come along."

A little silence fell in the saloon as they went out and up the stairs outside. Gilda opened the door of a room that reeked of perfume and motioned Frosty to a chair. She put the bottle on a table, then perched herself there on the table edge, long, well-rounded legs swinging, giving Frosty long, high glances of white flesh, black silk, frothy underthings.

"What do you know about Sam getting killed?" she demanded.

"Sort of sweet on him, weren't you?" Frosty hooted.

"Maybe. He was a two-timing louse, and all—damn him! But in some ways—" She shrugged. "The pretty face of that Tarrant heifer turned him to the melting point. Damn her, too! Sam ought to've known better. Right after he had the run-in with her on the range, and Bill Tarrant whipped him, Sam come whining up to me. Right in this room—Link come in. He smacked Sam around and said he'd kill him if he didn't leave that girl alone. Link has his eyes on her himself."

Frosty nodded reflectively. Said: "Then why'd you invite Link up here a while ago?"

"You see a lot," she grunted, recrossing her legs. A bit of moisture broke out in the palms of Frosty's hands. Gilda was built just like that.

"I wanted to talk to Link. Try to pump him. Bigod! I think Link killed Sam himself!" She was off the table, crossed and sat on his lap, her arms around his neck. Her lips came down and she pressed hard against him. The hot breath of her as she breathed in his ears, the warmth and softness of her body as she shifted on his lap, drew Frosty beyond himself.

"You—you're wonderful!" she gasped, pulling back at last. She pulled at the low neck of her dress, seeming unable to breathe. "You know something. About Sam and Link. Tell me, cowboy. If you like me, tell me."

"Wait a little," he begged, his voice husky.

HE reached for her again, held her close to him. "Maybe I don't know anything," he panted. She twisted back, glaring. A jerk and she was out of his arms, and a step carried her to the dresser. She whirled, right hand coming out of a drawer. She held a gun.

"You came to pump me, eh?" she rapped out harshly. "Well, I've said too much. You want information so you can help Bill Tarrant. On account of that filly sister. Damn you, and her. She turned Sam's head. She caused his

death—no matter if Bill Tarrant or Link Bowder did the shooting! Talk, now, or I'll give you out of this gun just what I'll give Link Bowder if I make sure he done in Sam!"

Frosty only half heard her. He was staring at the gun in her hand. It was a pearl-handled .38, and one one side of the butt-plate that showed under Gilda's palm, he saw part of the initial: J-T. Janet Tarrant's gun!

Frosty's eyes met Gilda's. He moved slowly toward her. "You figured Link for this kill, eh? Gives him the ranch, gets Sam away from Janet Tarrant. You figure to kill Link, with Janet Tarrant's gun. You hate her for something she can't help, eh? Yes, I mean that gun there!"

Involuntary, she looked down at the weapon. Frosty moved. He grabbed her wrist and twisted it. She fave a little cry and let go. "Damn you!" she panted. "Damn you!"

She scratched at him. He grabbed her hands. She kicked at him, panting and swearing under her breath. It was like trying to hold a wildcat, Frosty thought. He tried to hold her away. She pulled back. There was a sound of ripping cloth. She shrugged out of the torn dress. There was a swirl of frothy silk, of white limbs as she hurled herself at him again.

"You'd frame Janet Tarrant, would you? How'd you get that gun? How, huddem it!" Frosty snarled. He had her down, one knee on a bare, heaving stomach, her wrists imprisoned.

"I found it where she dropped it getting into her buckboard. A week or so ago. Maybe I'd used it on Sam. I don't know. I hate her. I despise you!" She writhed upward, trying to free herself.

"Be still!" The aggravation in Frosty's voice was also a note of warning that his patience was at an end. Gilda went quiet. Frosty released her, arose, went over and picked up Janet's gun and pocketed it. Gilda gathered herself to her feet, heedless of her scant attire, of heaving breasts no longer cloth-imprisoned.

"I might have gone for you," she snarled.

"Double the order," Frosty nodded. "Now, best for you to do is keep your mouth shut. Or leave this place."

"And let—"

"It wasn't that you really care for Sam. You just ache with a hate for a girl that made men want to ride her line fence all the time," he cut in. "Why—"

"I'll keep still," she muttered. "Good evening—and to hell with you."

He bowed toward the door. She moved suddenly, caught him, rained eager, excited kisses on his face. "Good luck, Kee. Get in a shot for me."

DOWNSTAIRS, Frosty stood beside his horse, deep in thought. Link had threatened Sam; Link was in love—in a hell of a way—with Janet Tarrant. Saw Sam spying on her when she was swimming, and let him have it. Link knew Sam was dead, because he called the sheriff right away—as soon as Sam's horse came in. Bill Tarrant had made threats, and was in jail—out of Link's way.

It fitted like a shopmade boot. But where was proof?

Tomorrow, there'd be an inquest. Maybe Link Bowder would spill something. Or maybe an open accusation at the inquest would drag him into making an overt move. It was all the chance Frosty had. He mounted and rode back toward Goblet ranch.

It was late when he got back. No lights showed in the bunkhouse. No

lights showed in the bull's manse, either. Frosty frowned. He went softly up on the porch and knocked.

"Go away! I swear it, I'll shoot!" Janet Tarrant's voice came from the other side of the door. A tight, fear-stricken voice.

"Janet! It's me. Frosty," he called. He heard her sob of relief and the bolt on the door was drawn. It was dark in the hall. He felt her arms seeking him, and she was quivering against him.

"Get a light. Tell me what's happened here," he commanded. She moved into another room. Light flared up. Frosty started. The girl's dress was ripped half off her. One bare shoulder and the upper slope of one breast seemed to quiver with outraged indignation.

She twisted, glaring, and jerked out of his arms. "You came here to pump me?" she demanded.

"Link Bowder," she raged, anger heightening her color. "He came after dark. The boys must have stayed over at the west line camp for the night. Bowder came to me, offered to help Bill. He said he's see the charges were dropped. And he—he mentioned seeing me at the waterhole when Sam was spying on me."

Frosty's lips were thin, grim lines. "That's proof enough. It shows Link was there. So Link killed his half brother."

She nodded. "And I told him to leave. He grabbed at me and I managed to break away from him and locked myself away from him."

"That'll be something else I'll remember," Frosty ground out. "I wonder where he'd be tonight?"

"You're not leaving me!' she denied. She was against him, heedless of the firm, young flesh she disclosed. "Ill feel so much better, and safer—like this!"

She was in his arms, lips half parted and turned up for him. Frosty caught his breath in a great gasp and his head went down. His lips caressed the little hollow of her throat, found her mouth. The girl was moaning, her fingers closing and unclosing on his arms as she pressed against him with such a strain it shook her from head to foot. He lifted her in his arms. She made little sounds in her throat and her eyes were wide, filled with anticipation, starry.

"I didn't know it would—be like—this!" she gasped.

The soft warmth of her body, the sense of her loveliness in his arms, her lips pressed moistly to his, was somehow stunning to Frosty Kee. Wampole, Montana, cattle wars would have to wait. May be for a long, long time. A man can't gain his fill of heaven in a too short period.

"Frosty!" There was an awed, pleading note in her voice.

"Yes," he said huskily, holding her nearer with one arm. He reached over and turned the lamp down, then blew it out. . . .

THE joy ran out of Frosty, and a cold, unrelenting anger took its place as they rode, he and Janet, into One Step next morning. The girl sensed it. She rode close.

"Please, Frosty," she begged. "You'll be careful."

"No," he grunted. "When I first saw you, I was interested. I hated Link Bowder more, after the way he looked at you. I've spent my life fighting. Always for what I figured right. Now, since last night—" Janet colored and hung her head—"I know what I aim to do."

It was flat and final. They stopped before the sheriff's office. He helped her dismount. A couple of men were there with Tate. Members of the coroner's jury that would later go to the undertaker's across the street.

Tate nodded at Frosty, a wondering look on his face. He offered Janet a chair.

Tate cleared his throat. "This ain't to my likin', Miss Janet," he offered. "Personal, I can't figger Bill for this."

"He didn't, sheriff," Frosty put in. "I didn't. Miss Janet didn't. That leaves one man who could. And did."

A dark form fell across the door. Link Bowder stood there. He looked at Janet in a veiled, threatening way, and scowled at Frosty. Link Bowder's right hand went down to rest near his holstered gun.

"You know so much, stranger," he snarled at Frosty. "Maybe you know too much."

"Too much for you," Frosty droned in deadly monotone. "I know you and Sam fought. I've got the word of Gilda Dort for that. I know—" Frosty faced the sheriff.—"Miss Janet was swimming in the waterhole the day Sam was killed. He was spying on her."

The sheriff's mouth hung agape. "Whyn't you say so before?"

"Wait," Frosty motioned. "The girl didn't kill Sam Bowder. Another man who had designs on her, followed Sam and saw him spying on the girl, and shot Sam. That same low-down son, Tate, tried to attack Janet last night. He mentioned that *he* saw her at the waterhole, too."

There was belief on Tate's face. He started to speak.

"Don't believe a word of that, Tate," Link Bowder snarled. "This girl can't prove I said anything of the kind."

"Huh?" Tate grunted. Understanding was his, and he moved toward Link Bowder. "Nobody had mentioned your name, Link. I'll take that gun—"

"Take it, then!" Link howled. He stepped behind Janet and caught one arm around her as she jumped up. Link's gun snaked out. "Take it!" he snarled again.

The muscles of Frosty's face froze in a granite mask; the dull, yet paradoxically bright way of his eyes was an odd, intense flame. His right hand moved and his gun came up. It flashed, and the sheriff's office bulged to that thrust of sound. A few drops of red splattered from the gunhand thrust under Janet's right arm. The pistol flew from Link Bowder's grasp.

Choking back a scream, he shoved Janet toward Frosty Kee, dropped to his knees and pawed up the gun with his left hand. Frosty fired again and watched Link Bowder with unblinking eyes. Link was stumbling to his feet. Blood sprayed from his maimed right hand. His left arm flopped and beat at his side.

"You damned fool!" Frosty snarled. "That's my ace in the hole, Bowder: I've never killed a man in all my life. I never *had* to. You didn't figure I had nerve enough to fire that close to Janet. I—"

LINK BOWDER, screaming, raging like a maniac, rushed at him, kicking out. The gun in Frosty's hand rose, fell. Link Bowder groaned and folded to the floor.

Frosty looked up. "There he is, sheriff. He made his first mistake when he called you so quick. He knew Sam was dead. He made the mistake of making a threat before Gilda Dort. He made a lot of others along the line."

"Yeah," Tate mumbled, blinking down at Link Bowder. "But I reckon he's made his last one now. You can't even shoot a snake like Sam in the back an' beat the rope."

The sun seemed brighter. It felt damned fine to Bill Tarrant as he stood with Frosty and Janet outside the jail.

"You just can't ride off now, Frosty," Bill insisted.

"Ain't aiming to, Bill." Frosty reached over and took Janet by the hand. "Nope. Not very soon. The truth is, I'm giving lessons. You, now, need a shave. A few drinks. Stay in town a while, and then ride out."

Bill grinned knowingly. Then asked: "Lessons? What kind of lessons, Frosty?"

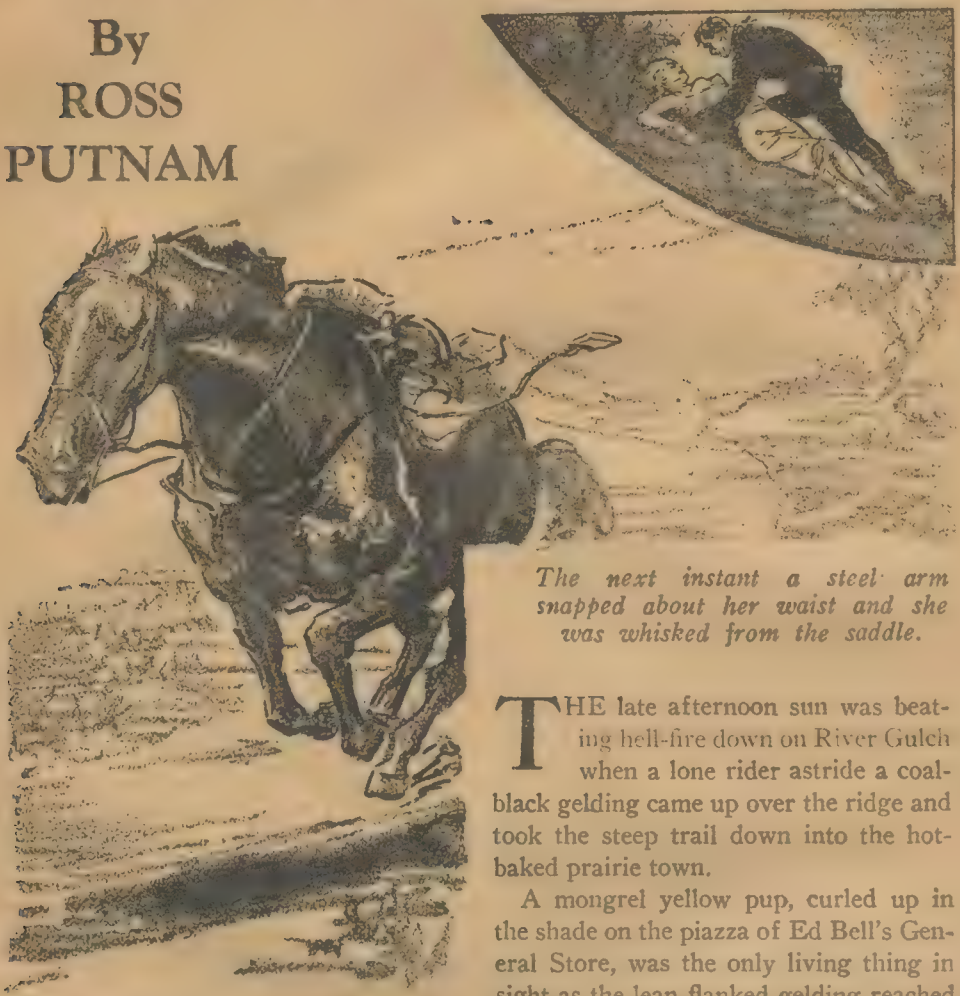
"Nice ones," Janet said in a small, happy, anticipatory voice. She was blushing and smiling, all together.

Bill turned away. Frosty and Janet

(Continued on page 103)

THE WACO KID—

By ROSS PUTNAM



The next instant a steel arm snapped about her waist and she was whisked from the saddle.

The Black Rider was a mystery man, but he was a gunman, too, and that was enough for Rattler Magee. His one order was, "Keep away from Lake Gorham's woman!" But the Black Rider didn't like taking orders

THE late afternoon sun was beating hell-fire down on River Gulch when a lone rider astride a coal-black gelding came up over the ridge and took the steep trail down into the hot-baked prairie town.

A mongrel yellow pup, curled up in the shade on the piazza of Ed Bell's General Store, was the only living thing in sight as the lean-flanked gelding reached the flat.

It might have been a ghost town for all the activity. Even the Big Amanoosik, a raging torrent when water poured down from the hills, was a thin pencil of mud.

The rider walked his mount over the cement-hard road. He had an easy saddle seat and expert bridle hands. His shoulders were unusually broad and his hips were narrow. Black boots, black bullhide chaps, a black shirt, and a black sombrero with an orange silk band around

MURDERER

the crown was his costume. It was difficult to tell where the horse ended and the rider began. Even the butts of twin six-shooters were ebony inlaid with silver triangles.

It was evident he was a stranger to River Gulch. His blue eyes narrowed to cautious slits and his right hand hung near a holstered hog-leg as he neared the head of the dusty main street.

GIG MOWBRY, the half-wit boy who emptied the spitoons and swept the floor in Ed Regan's *Big Horn Saloon,* spotted the black rider first. There were a dozen men peering over the green curtain strung across the plate glass window when the stranger hitched his gelding to the post outside the *Big Horn,* reached into a saddle bag for a doe-hide poke and mounted the three wooden steps.

Two Red Dog games stopped as the black rider entered the saloon. Rick Jarret, Big Ed's right hand man, was behind the bar. He rubbed a dirty rag over the well-worn mahogany.

"What'll it be, mister?"

The stranger lifted his foot to the rail. "Double whiskey."

Rick's beady eyes moved from the gun butts up. The black rider's build marked him as one tough hombre. A lone range wolf, not to be crossed.

Big Ed Regan was thinking the same thing as he watched the stranger from the rear of the saloon. Rick slid bottle and glass across the bar. Regan backed through a door.

The black rider was on his second drink when a tall, firm-breasted, willowy blonde came through the door leading to a back room. She wore a black satin, floor-length gown that had seen better days but served to hug her magnificent figure, limning the swell of her breasts, the sensuous curve of her waist and the svelte arch where her hips sloped into her thighs. She was Toni, Big Ed Regan's girl.

She came up to the bar, crossed her arms under her breasts, forcing a hint of their satiny upper slopes above the neckline of the dress. She looked the black rider over, her dark blue eyes avid under curled lashes.

"Welcome to River Gulch," she said.

"Thanks."

She slid closer. "My name's Toni. How about drinking where there's a little privacy?"

His sharp eyes ran over her figure. Toni had a way of leaning on the bar so that her dress modeled perfectly every enticing line of her body.

"That suits me."

She linked her arms in his. "Take the bottle. I've got glasses in my room."

All eyes were on them as they left the bar. Toni opened a door. "Okay, handsome. We park here."

THE black rider entered a small room. His eyes shifted from the window back to the door. Toni closed it, undulated over to him, her hips swaying and the slinky satin of her dress sliding caressingly over her breasts.

"It's about time a *man* hit this town," she said huskily, putting her hands on his shoulders intimately. "I like you, stranger. What's your name?"

"What's the difference?"

She shrugged. "Not very sociable, are you?"

His hands went to her waist, savored the curved hollows of it. "Don't get much chance, sister."

Toni's body swung against him. Her head came back, red lips parted. "Got the law after you?"

The black rider stiffened. His eyes became chips of steel. "What made yuh ask that?"

Toni shrugged. "Nothin' much."

Her arms twined about his neck and their mouths met. Toni knew how to make her kisses count. She parted her lips, breathed unsteadily. She could feel his muscles tense as the warmth of her body made itself felt by him. Her fingertips touched his cheeks, twined in his hair. Slowly, she pressed herself even closer, working her moist lips against his mouth, driving him half mad with the artful throbbing of her body.

THE black rider never had a chance. He heard the door hinges squeak but before he could wrench loose from Toni's embrace, Big Ed Regan had him covered. Toni slipped out of the room, closed the door behind her.

"I figgered yuh'd fall for somethin' like that, stranger," Regan said. "Don't imagine yuh git much chance to see a woman with the lawmen after yuh."

The muscles of the black rider's jaw

tightened. "What's the game, hombre?"

Regan smiled. "Jus' a little friendly talk. Yuh see, I don' cotton tuh the law neither. Yuh killed a man, didn't yuh?"

Steel-blue eyes slitted. "I mind my own business."

"Shore thing, mister. I figgered maybe yuh'd like a place tuh hole out an' fill yuh poke while yuh doin' it."

"What if I did?"

"I got the place fuh yuh."

AN HOUR later—five miles out of River Gulch—the black rider drew up at the mouth of a canyon, shoved his guns into the ends of his slicker roll, raised a red bandana in his right hand.

Those were the instructions Big Ed Regan had given him. His tongue clicked and the gelding moved forward at a slow walk. The black rider saw the glint of a rifle barrel behind a boulder but he paid no attention, rode by. A split second later a sharp command rang out.

"Git 'em up, hombre!"

The black rider's hands went above his head. His knees applied pressure and the gelding stopped. The rifle-bearer, a squat, dark-faced individual, came out of hiding.

"Ridin' fuh pleasure?" he grunted.

"Can't say as I am. Big Ed Regan says cactus don't grow on rocks." It was the password.

"Suits me, mister. Yuh take the trail beyond th' clump o' dwarf sage. Bear left at th' fork."

RATTLER MAGEE hefted a lead-tipped quirt, eyed the broad-shouldered build of the black rider. One taloned hand rested on a gun butt. His shoulders were loosely hunched under a checkered shirt.

"It don' make no damn' bit o' difference tuh me who yuh are or where yuh come from, mister," he grunted. "Big Ed ain't nobody's fool. Ever rustled stock?"

Behind the rustler chief, a dozen hulking, unshaven mongrels—half-breeds and whites—glowered from beneath shaggy brows.

"Some."

"Handy with them Colts?"

Before the black rider could reply, Rattler Magee stooped, picked up a round stone, tossed it into the air. "Hit it, hombre!"

Ping! A bullet hit the stone before it fell, cracked it in two. A second bullet smashed one of the pieces, shattered it a foot from the ground.

Rattler Magee's thin lips twisted in a satisfied grin. "That's plenty good enuff shootin' fuh me, stranger. Yuh kin ride with us if yuh hanker to. We split six ways. Three fuh the Big Boss, two fuh the men, an' one fuh me. Suit yuh?"

"Who's the Big Boss?"

Rattler frowned. "Yuh'll git along a heap better not askin' questions. Do you ride with us or not?"

"I'll ride."

DARKNESS had settled over the rustler's camp when Big Ed Regan came up the hidden trail. There was a flat grin on his thick, fleshy face as he stepped into Rattler Magee's lean-to. The new recruit was with the chief. Big Ed took a folded handbill out of his shirt pocket.

"Good likeness uv yuh, kid," he said.

Rattler took the bill, held it close to the fire. It was a wanted circular with a picture of the black rider. The bill read:

WANTED FOR MURDER
PONY CARLSON
alias

The Waco Kid
$500 Reward
Dead or Alive!

"I figgered I might just as well make sure," Big Ed said, "so I dropped in tuh see Sheriff Bronson. The bills were stacked up on his desk. They must want yuh bad tuh put a price on yore head."

Stripped of his anonymity, Pony Carlson opened up, explained how he had shot a man in a saloon brawl, another in a stage coach holdup, a third for the gold he was carrying.

Rattler wadded the bill, tossed it into the fire. "Bronson nor nobody ain't trackin' yuh down here, Pony." There was a note of respect for the killer in his voice. "I'm makin' yuh my right hand man an' splittin' one-quarter of my share with yuh. Bronson's been gittin' tough lately an' I figger yo're the hombre tuh gun-fan 'im back tuh his hole."

NOT many hours after sun-up the following morning, Rattler Magee led the way up a steep mountain trail, drew rein when his bay reached a small plateau. He pointed to the lush, verdant valley below, fed by a clear-running brook. Two punchers were driving a herd of long-horns into a fenced range off the brook.

"Them's Denton's cattle," Rattler said. "Must be a good three hundred head. He's got another thousand white-faces on the East range. Think yuh kin run 'em tonight?"

Pony Carlson's eyes scanned the lay of the land. "The long-horns?"

"Yep. We'll tackle the rest later. Denton's got a good five thousand head o' stock." Rattler's bony swung. "Yuh kin run 'em through the flat where the brook twists an' then take the gorge." He pointed to a smaller herd browsing a mile below the Denton ranch. "On the way out yuh might pick up a passel of Lake Gorham's steers. That's them. Better stick around fuh a mite an' git the layout straight. I'll go back an' start the boys workin' on a corral."

Pony slid out of the saddle, tethered his gelding to a mountain oak, looked down on the calm, peaceful green of the valley. He could see blue-gray smoke rising from the chimney of a white ranch house to the North. That was probably Carl Denton's place, the Q Bar D. It looked clean and well kept. Even the fence separating the rolling land from the Gorham ranch didn't have a broken bar.

Pony rolled a cigarette. He was striking the match on the seat of his black chaps when he heard the sharp crack of a dry twig behind him. He spun around, both hands streaking for his guns. His fingers reached the butts but the Colts never cleared leather.

He stood there, an amused expression curling his lips, gazing into the muzzle of a gun. Behind the gun he saw the most beautiful red-headed girl he had ever laid eyes on. She was in riding garb but a mannish blue silk shirt couldn't hide the tip-tilted swell of her breasts, and her brief skirt only accentuated the graceful curve of her hips. Pony drew his breath in slowly. His eyes were drawn magnetically to the front of the silk blouse. The three top buttons were open and he could see the whiteness of her throat and catch just a hint of the downy valley that separated her breasts.

"Keep your hands away from those guns," she instructed. "One false move and I'll shoot!"

Pony watched her bosom swell and her deep blue eyes flash. She was plenty

nervous toting that big six-shooter. Her red lips trembled and her arm shook.

"Put the cannon up, ma'am," Pony said softly. "It might go off all of a sudden like."

"Unbuckle your gun belt!" she snapped.

Pony shifted. "I couldn't do that even for a pretty lady, ma'am." He moved closer to her, inch by inch.

"Unbuckle it!"

Pony leaped. The gun in the girl's hand went off, but not before the heel

"Let me go!" she gasped. "Let me go!"

of his palm had knocked her arm down. The bullet whined between his legs, caromed off a rock. A twist of Pony's wrist and the smoking hog-leg dropped to the ground. He snapped his arm around the girl's waist, held her in a vise-like grip.

IT WAS a pleasant situation for Pony Carlson. The sudden contact with the girl's lithe figure, the almost imperceptible warmth of a soft breast on his wrist, quickened his pulse. Her younger, fresher beauty stirred him far more than had the girl at Big Ed Regan's place. And she didn't reek from cheap perfume, either. There was a clean, wholesome fragrance about her.

"Yuh come pretty close tuh wingin' me, ma'am," he said.

She beat her tiny fists against his chest. "Let me go!" she screamed. "Let me go!"

Pony was forced to quiet her. Her voice was high-pitched and it carried. He swung her off her feet, dropped her to the ground. Something happened to her silk blouse. Either his fingers had caught in the neckline and pulled more buttons loose or the twisting of her body had jerked them off. The blue silk fell away, baring the upper halves of her milky breasts. Pony swallowed hard. Her skirt was above her knees. Now he could see where her sun-tanned legs merged into perfect, velvet-skinned thighs.

She cowered away from him, her hazel eyes wide with terror, her delicious breasts rising and falling in a quickened rhythm. Pony drew a deep breath. The palms of his hands moistened. Pulses throbbed in his temples. He watched the involuntary movement of her gorgeous bosom, the nervous fluttering of her whole body. She was soft and round and delectable. Pony knelt beside her.

"Don't touch me!" she gasped.

Pony's eyes licked involuntarily at the undulating sweep of her form. He had known women before, but none like this one. He gripped her arms, pushed her down again, when she tried to get up. Before she could cry out his mouth smothered her lips, forcing them to part until he could almost feel her sharp, white teeth. She stiffened and yet her trembling wouldn't stop. Pony shot his arms around her waist, and pulled her to him in a bear-like embrace. Again and again he kissed her, brutal bruising kisses.

Breathless, she jerked her mouth away, pummeled frantically at his face and head. Pony laughed, drew her so close that she could reach only his broad back with her flying fists. The nearness of her and the warmth of her writhing curves against him drove him mad. He forced her head up, once more joined his mouth to the sweet moistness of her lips. The fingers of his left hand found silken softness where her silk shirt had pulled away from her body.

Something happened to her then, something beyond her own volition. She shuddered, went limp. Her lips responded suddenly under Pony's mouth. And then her arms went around him returning his embrace. Fiercely, she nestled closer. Her fingers dug into his arms and she moaned softly.

PONY came to his feet, leaned over, picked up her gun. The initial "D" was inlaid in the butt. Lines furrowed his forehead.

"You couldn't be a Denton, could you?" he queried.

She sat up, brushed back her red, bobbed hair. Spots of color glowed in

her cheeks. "You'd better go," she said huskily.

"I got a right to know who yuh are."

Her eyes flashed. "You'll find out—soon enough! I'll see you hang for this!"

Pony hefted her gun. "Them's fightin' words, ma'am." His eyes scanned the valley. A rider was coming up the trail—fast. "I'll be seeing you again, ma'am. The sooner the better."

CARL DENTON and Lake Gorham were on the porch of the Denton ranch-house when Mary rode up.

"We heard a shot from the ridge, Mary," her father said.

She nodded. "Yes. I fired at one of the rustlers."

Gorham paled. "You shouldn't take chances like that, Mary! He—he might have killed you!"

She tossed her flaming head. "I'm not afraid." Unconsciously, as she looked at Lake Gorham, the man who had been paying court to her for almost a year, she made comparisons. Gorham was thin and hawk-faced. Whatever good looks he possessed were jaded. But her father approved of him. A marriage would consolidate the two ranches, give Carl Denton a breathing spell.

Gorham came close to her, ran his hands over her arms. He was always touching, brushing against her. "Please stay in the valley, Mary," he said. "It isn't safe in those hills."

That night, as they sat alone on the Denton porch, Lake Gorham twined his arm about Mary's waist, ran his slim fingers up her side, caressing possessively the girl beside him.

"I don't know what I'd do if anything happened to you, Mary," he said huskily, his feverish breath fanning her cheek. "Why can't you see how much in love with you I am?" He bent her back, found her lips with his mouth. At the same time his free hand went to her knee, fondled its dimpled curve.

Mary submitted helplessly. She had to. Her father had needed Lake Gorham's financial help ever since the band of rustlers had begun making raids in the valley. They drove off Gorham's steers, too, but he had plenty of cash to fall back on.

She stiffened when she felt the convulsive movement of his seeking hands, the wetness of his hot lips on her throat. She knew that he was aware that only the top of a thin, cotton chemise covered her breasts. She could hear him panting, feel him trembling with excitement.

"Please, Lake," she whispered.

His fingers were like crawling snakes. With a sudden twist, Mary tore herself away, leaving Lake hot-eyed and gasping! For some strange reason she was thinking of the black-garbed rustler and the touch of Lake Gorham's fingers sickened her. She rose, smoothed out the folds of her skirt.

"I'm going to bed, Lake."

He barred her way, swept her into his arms. His mouth bruised her lips and his bony chest hurt and crushed her breasts. At that very moment, the butt of Pony Carlson's hog-leg was smashing down on a cowpuncher's head while three members of Rattler Magee's band started the Denton herd on the run through the gulch.

SHERIFF IKE BRONSON rode out to the Q Bar D the following morning. He was a tall, gaunt man with leather cheeks. He listened grimly while Carl Denton complained that three hundred of his long-horns had been rustled the night before.

"And ninety head of my best white-faces," Lake Gorham chimed in.

Bronson pushed his sombrero back. These last few weeks had aged him ten years. "Nobody seen 'em, did they?"

Mary spoke up. "Yes, I saw one of them on the ridge. He was dressed completely in black and he rode a black gelding."

The sheriff's eyes narrowed. He brought a circular out of his pocket. "This the hombre, Miss Denton?"

Mary blanched. Her heart thundered under her breast. "Y-yes!" she gasped.

Bronson hitched up his belt, smiled. "That's all I need tuh know. Yuh shore he's one o' the band?"

"Well—er—I'm not sure, but—but he was looking over the valley and—"

"Guess he's hooked in."

Lake Gorham studied the circular. "This man's a murderer, not a rustler."

Bronson nodded. "The Waco Kid don't stop at nothin'."

IN A hidden pocket surrounded by pine-clothed ridges, Pony Carlson looked on while Rattler Magee's mongrels worked on the four hundred-odd head of rustled cattle, burning out the hide brands. He chewed on a piece of bluejoint grass and his eyes had a far-away look in them. He was thinking of the red-headed Denton girl and his thoughts were pleasant.

Rattler Magee, who had left camp at dawn on a mysterious errand, rode up, slid out of the saddle.

"Yuh better lay low fuh a spell, Pony," he said grimly. "Yuh been spotted."

Pony's eyebrows arched. "That so?"

"Denton's daughter seen yuh on the ridge."

Pony smiled. "I wondered who the good-lookin' filly was. She's Denton's daughter. That makes it interestin'."

Magee scowled. "Rustlin' an' women don't mix, Pony."

"Depends on how you mix 'em. She's free, white, and single, ain't she?"

A dark cloud passed over Rattler's pinched face. "The Denton gal is Lake Gorham's woman. We don' want no trouble with Gorham."

"We're rustlin' his cattle, ain't we?"

"That don' give yuh no call tuh mess with his woman. I'm tellin' yuh, Pony, it's ornery business. Yuh'll end up with hemp around yore neck."

Magee's warning failed to put a curb on Pony Carlson's urge to see the lovely red-head again. He ducked out of camp, rode to the ridge overlooking the valley. He had a faint, hopeful suspicion she'd come back. He couldn't talk himself out of believing she'd liked it when he kissed her.

He watched the Q Bar D ranch-house like a hawk. An hour went by before he spotted a horse and rider moving across the flat. He knew it was a woman from the way she rode. Pony started his gelding down the trail to the valley. At the half-way mark he backed behind a bunch of cedars, waited.

Soon he heard the *clump-clump-clump* of horse's hoofs, the sound of rolling stones. In another few moments the Denton girl rode by on her chestnut mare. Pony crouched low, counted ten —slowly. He gave the gelding the spurs, shot up the trail.

Mary Denton heard the thundering behind her, turned. The next instant a steel-banded arm snapped around her waist and she was whisked out of the saddle. The chestnut, frightened, came up on its hind legs, bucked, headed down-trail like a streak of greased lightning.

Pony reined in when the gelding

Her gun went off, but not before he had knocked it down.

reached a clearing hidden from the valley. He slid to the ground, set Mary Denton on her feet. The palm of his hand burned as thought it had been branded, from the contact with her body.

"Nice meetin' you again, Miss Denton."

The color was high on her cheeks. For a moment she was too amazed to speak.

The knuckles of her hands shone white through drawn skin. Her breasts heaved tumultuously.

"What—what do you mean by this?" she gasped.

Pony smiled affably. "Just a hankerin' to see you again. Can't blame a man for that, can you?"

THERE were words on Mary Denton's tongue—harsh words—but they remained unuttered. She, too, had been conscious despite herself of a sensation of pleasure when he had seized her. No idle curiosity had prompted her coming up the ridge trail again in the hope of meeting this black-garbed outlaw. It was a magnetic appeal that could not be denied. She had been awake half the night re-living the ecstasy of his hard, fierce kisses.

Pony read the thoughts passing through her mind. "I guess you kind of hankered to see me, too."

She stiffened. "I did not! I came up to kill you! I know who you are! Your name is Pony Carlson! You're the Waco Kid! You're a—a *murderer!*"

The word snapped out. "Too bad you forgot to bring a gun," Pony said quietly. He offered one of his black Colts, butt forward. "Here, this'll do."

Mary Denton looked at the gun. Her hand reached out, hesitated, drew back. Then she did a strange thing. She burst into tears.

Pony winced, holstered the gun, stepped towards her awkwardly. Her head was hanging and her shoulders were slumped. The front of her blouse bellied and he could glimpse her white breasts under a chemise top.

"I—I didn't mean no harm, ma'am," he blurted.

The next thing he knew she had swayed into his arms. Pony never knew how he managed it, but he kissed her. This time there was no resistance, no delay before her body went limp. This time her soft, moist mouth responded immediately with a breathless eagerness that left Pony gasping.

Pony Carlson knew more about six-guns and horses than he knew about women, but instinct told him what to do. His embrace, gentle, yet confident, set Mary Denton's body to quivering like dry alfalfa swept by a prairie fire. His mouth knew the sweetness of her clinging lips, then dropped to her velvet throat. Her loose blouse slid from her shoulder baring the smooth velvety flesh.

Locked in each other's arms, they were oblivious to all else.

Pony was breathing hard now and the blood pounded in his veins. Waves of warmth poured over him, withering him.

Mary locked her hands behind his head, forced his mouth into the well-spring of her own. And time stood still. . . .

THE sun was low in the West when Mary stirred in Pony's arms. Her trembling fingers straightened her blouse on her shoulders, smoothed the wrinkles in her skirt.

"You'd better go now, Pony," she said softly.

Pony shook his head. "Not now. I'm partial to these parts."

"You can't stay, Pony! The sheriff knows you're in the hills. A posse will be after you before sundown. Like a fool, I told him. I could kill myself for it."

Pony smiled. "Sheriffs don't bother me none, darling. I'm going, all right, but you're riding with me."

"But—but I *can't,* Pony! I can't leave my father!"

"You mean you can't ride with a murderer."

She clung to him, pressing herself close. "No, it isn't that, Pony! I swear it isn't! I don't care what you've done! All I know is that you've thrilled me as no other man ever has."

His hands tightened on her slim waist. "You trust me, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Then you'll ride with me."

PONY knew what was going to happen the moment he rode into the rustler camp with his precious passenger. He dismounted in front of Rattler Magee's lean-to, helped Mary to the ground. Her face was white, frightened.

"Rattler," Pony said, "meet Miss Denton."

The rustler's jaw twitched. His eyes blazed. "Damn yuh!" he snarled, reaching for his gun.

It was half-way out of the holster when the Colt in Pony's hand roared. Rattler screamed, jerked his hand up. Blood poured from a bullet-smashed thumb.

"Get out!" Pony snapped. Rattler scurried through the oak sapling uprights to where the rest of his foul-looking gang was grouped around a fire. Pony stood at the entrance to the lean-to. "From now on, I'm running this shebang," he bellowed. "If any of you coyotes got an argument on that score, draw fast. One of you can ride into the valley and tell Denton he can have his daughter back for ten thousand —in gold!"

Not a man moved. They had seen him split a small stone with one bullet and splinter half of it with the next. They knew he had a price on his head for murder.

Pony backed into the lean-to. Mary Denton was staring at him, amazement written on her face. "It—it's just a trick!" she gasped. "A trick to get ransom from my father! You—you—"

Pony nodded. "That's right. Just a trick. There's liable to be some shootin' so keep low."

Anger and hate choked her up. She dropped to the ground, buried her face in her hands. For a long time, Pony stood immobile, both guns at his hips, watching the group around the fire. He had seen one shadowed figure slip away to the horse corral. Darkness was settling fast. Behind him he heard Mary Denton sobbing softly. His black gelding was nibbling grass at the side of the lean-to.

Someone moved in the group at the fire. A gun barrel glinted. Pony shot from his hip. There was a muted scream from the gathering darkness, a horrible death rattle. A figure slumped to the ground, rolled over, lay still.

"Anybody else figurin' on shootin' it out?" Pony questioned.

In the dead silence, the sound of pounding hoofs was like distant thunder. Two riders came down the ridge trail, drew up at the fire dismounted. Rattler Magee's voice bridged the gap.

"The Boss wants tuh talk tuh yuh, Pony."

Pony hefted his hog-legs. "Bring him here."

The two men came forward. The stranger wore a white silk handkerchief across his lower face, masking all but his dark, piercing eyes. He stopped a dozen feet in front of the lean-to.

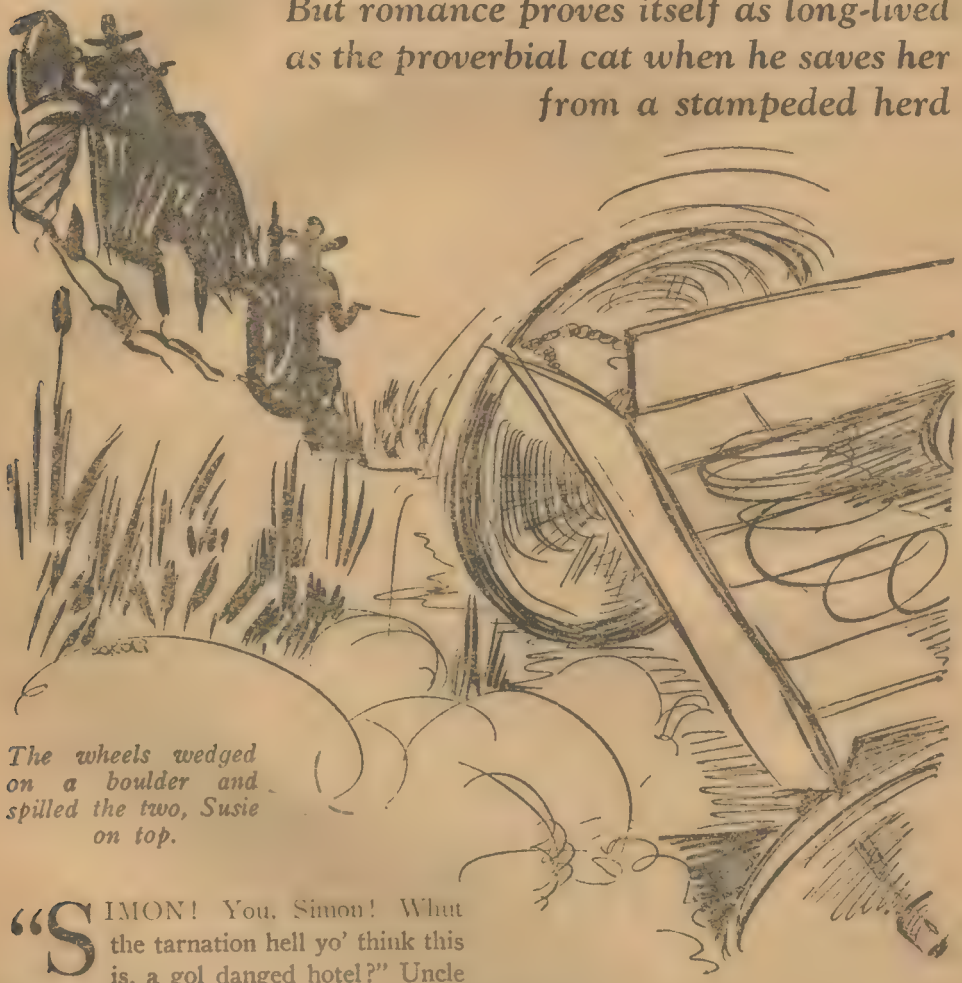
"Give up the girl, Carlson," he said. His voice was low and thick. "Yuh can't get out of here alive."

Pony wasn't watching the masked man. He had his eye on Rattler Magee.

(Continued on page 102)

FEUD'S

When Simon Bolivar Grimes killed her daddy, naturally Melinda would have nothing more to do with him. But romance proves itself as long-lived as the proverbial cat when he saves her from a stampeded herd



The wheels wedged on a boulder and spilled the two, Susie on top.

"SIMON! You, Simon! What the tarnation hell yo' think this is, a gol danged hotel?" Uncle Carter, bawling like a four year old bull, shattered the early morning silence.

Simon Bolivar Grimes had heard the first raucous bellow, some minutes earlier, but untangling himself from the ranch cook's lovely daughter took time and determination. The girl had developed the art of clinging to the utmost possible degree.

Susie Wrinkled-Meat, slim, shapely, and brown, had inherited an inappropriate name and piquantly prominent cheek bones from her late father, a Comanche chief; and her Spanish mother's contri-

END

By E. HOFFMANN PRICE

bution was a pair of devil-haunted black eyes and an insatiable urge for just one more kiss.

She wore a gown heavily paneled with

hand-made Mexican lace. It concealed this and revealed that—particularly *that,* of which Susie had plenty: such as sweetly rounded hips, and firm little breasts, coyly hinted at by the transparent yoke of her gown. She was sultry enough to need ventilated garments. . .

"Simon, darling," she sighed. "I hate to think of you're going with the pool herd to Abilene. I'll miss you awfully."

She kissed the gangling, tow-headed boy from Georgia until he tingled all the way to his cowhide boots. He had been telling Susie good-bye since eight o'clock the night before.

"Honey, I jest got to be rep of the Box-G," he panted. "But—"

"Simon, you blasted girl-crazy horn toad, wheah are you?" howled Uncle Carter from outside the cook's *'dobe* shack.

GRIMES pried the armful of torrid lace from his shirt front and stumbled toward the ranch house. His coffin-shaped face was longer than usual. Maybe if he stalled long enough, he could devise some way of taking Susie with him.

"Uncle Ca'tah," he began, planting himself at the kitchen table, "I got a whale of a headache. Anyway, they ain't going to be through putting the trail brand on all them critters till tonight."

Grimes' uncle, however, was almost psychic: "Bub, they ain't no use thinking of takin' Susie along. Them cowpokes would be so danged busy murderin' each other fo' one of her kisses, they'd plumb fo'get ridin' herd."

"I warn't thinkin' of that!" flared Grimes. "I jest been tryin' to figger out why Melinda Patton ain't putting any of her H-P critters in the pool. They's suthin' funny theah."

"You might ask Melinda," was the malicious retort.

Grimes, white with wrath, leaped to his feet. He and Melinda had been very much in love until he shot her father, the crooked banker who as front for a cattling rustling syndicate, had nearly put Uncle Carter out of business.

The impending civil war was blocked when a sweet voice purred from the threshold, *"Señor* Grimes, I 'ave jest notice there ees no flour and the bacon she ees damn' near finish."

It was Susie's mother, Catalina. Her comely face had a well-kissed look; and every quiver of her firm, generous breasts made Grimes wonder if his uncle wasn't mighty lucky in his arrangements to take care of John Wrinkled-Meat's daughter and widow.

"Simon," grunted Uncle Carter, "mebbe you an' Susie bettah take the buckboard and load it up with vittles. She kin drive it back."

It was so arranged; and presently they were on their way.

WHILE not quite half way to Skeleton Creek, Grimes noted a large herd near the bank of the creek that gave the town its name. The critters were branded BB. He had never heard of such an outfit. Frowning, he handed Susie the reins.

"You wait heah. I'm goin' ovah to the camp," he said, mounting the saddled *palamino* tethered to the tail gate of the wagon.

Grimes was moved by more than mere curiosity; it was part of his business to keep posted on who was who.

He skirted Skeleton Creek; but he had ridden scarcely fifty yards when he pulled up. The woman at the edge of a dawn-kissed pool, just visible through a thicket, was built to make Venus at

the fountain look like a Piute squaw. Her hair, gilded by the early light and streaming to her hips, was a passable substitute for the last flimsy garment that was settling about her ankles.

He got just a flash of a bosom that quivered like delicate pink tinted jelly. Then, before he could get a look at her face, she turned to the creek, tentatively tested its temperature with an outthrust foot. Though that move cheated Grimes of a fuller view, it gave him a chance to remember that no gentleman would spy on a lady's morning bath. He headed for the camp.

Two men squatted at the fire. Half a dozen others, likewise black dots against the horizontal rays that made Grimes blink and squint, were hustling about with their work.

As he approached, the two at the fire started to their feet, hands darting to their belts. The move, however, was checked when Grimes hailed the camp; but while that gesture had been natural enough, they did seem just a shade jumpy. One, short and squat, ducked out of sight; the other, tall and rangy, rose and approached Grimes.

As the gap closed, Grimes for the first time was able to see that the boss of that outfit had a black beard, a hatchet face and bushy brows; a salty, hard bitten *hombre* if there ever was one.

"Light and set, stranger," he invited. Then, gesturing at the pot on the fire, "they's still time fer some cawfee."

"Thank you, suh. I done et. I'm Simon Bolivar Grimes, suh, an' seein' yo' critters, I thought at fust you was some local outfit headin' fo' the pool herd."

"Yo're jest half right, bub," grinned the bearded man. "I'm Bart Bailey from Del Rio, which ain't exactly local. But last night I heard about a pool startin' from here and with so many cattle thieves on the prowl, I reckoned it'd be sensible tuh join up."

They chatted for a moment, then Grimes wheeled his horse and rode back to the buckboard. Susie was at the creek ford, waiting. The blonde woman was no longer in sight. But Grimes was not thinking of the beauties of nature.

"Mistah Bart Bailey," he pondered, "sho' drove his herd slow-like, fo' a gent what's afeerd of owl-hooters. Them critters is too fat fo' a fast run from Del Rio."

HALF an hour later, as they approached the mouth of an *arroyo,* he heard the whinny of a horse. It came from the right; and the greeting to his beasts was cut off before it was fairly out. Someone had blundered. The abrupt choking of the sound was a dead giveaway. There was an ambush ahead.

Grimes, pig stubborn, refused to retreat. In the *arroyo,* the light was still tricky for long range fire. As they were for a moment sheltered by a thicket, he said to Susie, "Grab my hoss and git out while I attend to that gent."

"I'm not scared," she countered; but she wisely dropped to the bed of the buckboard.

Grimes' drawn pistol, a single action .45 the length of a siege gun, lay on his knee. He was ready—

"Whack!" But the rifle blast came from the side of the *arroyo opposite* from the one where the concealed horse had whinnied.

A slug gouged a ragged welt along Grimes' ribs, thudding into the seat beside him. He yelled, pitched to the floor boards. The fuzztails bolted. The clattering drowned everything but the triumphant hoot from the left, and the answering shout from the right.

A man popped up from cover, high above the bottom of the *arroyo*. He was certain that he had plugged his victim; but a correction was on the way. The galloping mustangs had closed the gap; and then the long barreled .45 bellowed like artillery firing in battery. The lurker pitched headlong down the slope.

The mustangs wheeled sharply, wedging the wagon wheels on a boulder. The impact spilled Grimes from the seat, and piled Susie on top of him. The resulting pinwheel of bare legs, cowhide boots, and red calico settled to the rocky bottom just in time to miss the hail of pistol slugs that poured from the opposite bank. The choked whinny from the right had been guile, not stupidity; but for poor markmanship, Grimes would have been plugged from the left before he caught the trick.

Sheltered by the half upset wagon, he hosed the slope with lead. His second gun, however, had dropped, far beyond his reach; and as he frantically jacked the empties from his smoking weapon, a howl and a clatter of departing hoofs mocked him.

No chance to pursue. The saddle mount had broken from the tail gate and bolted. Susie was screeching to the high heavens, "Simon, they killed me!"

For a mortally wounded person, she was tolerably noisy. Helping her to her feet, he saw that a slug had creased her hip. So while Susie nonchalantly tore a strip from her skirt, Grimes pacified the mustangs, who were industriously kicking the dashboard to pieces, maneuvered them to extricate the wedged wagon wheel, and then caught his saddle mount. That done, he approached the pie-faced man who lay gaping stupidly at the sunrise.

HE WAS a stranger, and the contents of his pockets were not enlightening. His accomplice, escaping with both horses, had removed the most serviceable clue; but Grimes, after bundling the stiff into the buckboard, circled around the scene of the ambush.

One of the hidden mounts had a broken shoe, he learned from the hoofprints; and he found a lead-riddled hat near the spot where the lurker had watched the horses. It was a Stetson with a silver ornamental band. On the brim was an old bloodstain, almost obliterated. Though the law would not accept such a flimsy identification, it was good enough for Grimes.

That hat belonged to Lem Potts, the shyster lawyer who had been the sole survivor of the gun fight in which Grimes had blotted out Melinda Patton's father. There was no mistaking that blood stain.

The implications, however, reached much further. The signs indicated that it had been an impromptu ambush. There were no cigarette butts, no blurr of footprints to indicate a long vigil. Potts and the rifle man must have hastened from Bart Bailey's camp to intercept him.

Then he caught the play: Bailey and his companion had not realized that Grimes, dazzled by the horizontal rays, had not been able to recognize the man ducking from the camp fire. Thus the ambush was to keep Grimes from drawing any conclusions as to why Potts, survivor of the rustler syndicate, had had important business with Bailey.

Grimes, though unable to prove his suspicions, drove on toward town with his convictions.

THE law against carrying belt weapons in Skeleton Creek had just been repealed, mainly because everyone homocidally inclined concealed guns in boot-

She was built in a way that would have made Venus at the fountain look like a Piute squaw.

legs, hip pockets, and shoulder holsters instead of wearing them openly. This repeal, mainly due to Grimes' blasting the gizzards out of a pair of ruffians who had underestimated him, got him a sour glare from old Hob Terrill, the town marshal, who sat near the jail.

"Mawnin', Hob," beamed Grimes, jerking his thumb toward the corpse in the wagon. "I got some new business fo' you, an' the sheriff."

"I guess yuh got another alibi?" He helped Grimes unload the dead.

"Suttinly I has. Ef I'd fired fust, this

gent wouldn't never lived to pour a .45-70 along my ribs an' through the wagon seat. An' I got a witness."

The gritting sound Grimes heard as he clucked to the nags was the marshal's teeth. He turned back and added, "An' fo' six bits extry, you kin look an' see wheah that wild shot scraped Susie."

"Six bits, nothing!" mocked Susie, patting her hip. "It'll cost you both your eyes, *Señor* Terrill!"

The marshal, regarding the shapely bare legs Susie had cocked up on the dashboard, looked as though that would be cheap enough. Then he said, "I'll git yuh yet, yuh gol blamed trantler."

Grimes pulled up at Link Simpson's general store. Then, leaving Susie to stock up the wagon, Grimes headed toward the Corkscrew Inn, which was headquarters for the cattlemen who were pooling their herds for the long drive to Kansas.

HALF way to his destination, he halted, confused and embarrassed. A girl wearing stitched boots and a trim riding skirt that flattered the most fascinating hips on that side of the Pecos was approaching him. Her sweet, serious face was framed by pale golden hair. The upper fullness of a vee-necked silk blouse rippled deliciously with each stride. She had everything!

This was Melinda Patton. Dreading this first meeting since he'd shot her father, he turned to duck into the Last Chance Saloon; but the swinging door slammed outward, blocking him.

Grimes, lips dry and heart hammering, caught the glance of her blue eyes. She recoiled; a gleam of tears contrasted strangely with the sudden hardening of her face.

"Melinda—honey—" he blurted.

She swept past him. He suddenly was glad he was riding with the trail herd. That meeting had undone every effort to forget the way she had once smiled at him in the moonlight stealing through her window. She had to hate him now, just as it had been his duty to avenge the unexpectedly revealed duplicity of her father.

Worst of all, the blow off had come just as they'd decided, after an evening's conference, that they'd be married the following day.

He stumbled back and into the Corkscrew Inn, where he gargled two shots of whiskey. Then he glanced about and saw the reps of the other outfits who were to pool their cattle. Sitting in their midst was Bart Bailey. White-haired Gil Stewart of the Lazy M was saying, "Shore, I'm trail boss. But we kain't let in any outsiders onless the reps from each ranch agrees, unanimously."

"Hell," said Bailey, "you gents has jest as good as admitted they ain't no objections tuh me."

"Makes no difference," contended Stewart. "We ain't heard from the Box G outfit yet, and until—" Then, seeing Grimes, he hailed him: "Hi, thar, Simon! Come here an' meet Bart Bailey—"

"I done had that pleasure, Gil," the boy cut in. He grinned guilelessly at Bailey.

The bearded man, if he really were surprised to see Grimes, betrayed no amazement. He nodded, then said, "I'll jest leave whilst yuh do this votin', Stewart. An' as soon as yo're done, I'll get started trail-brandin' my critters."

Stewart led the local cattlemen to the proprietor's private room.

"That was jest a formality, fellers," he said. "Ain't no objections, is they, lettin' Bart Bailey team up with us."

"I'm objectin', suh," Grimes interposed. "Fo' the Box G, what's got mo'

critters in this herd 'an any other outfit."

For a moment there was a clamor of amazement at his vote. Bailey, apparently, had won the good graces of the four reps during the time he had gained by riding instead of deliberately driving to Skeleton Creek.

"What fur, Simon—? What's wrong with him—? What yuh got agin him—?"

"That's none of yo' dang business!" he retorted to the babbling trio. "Yo' asked, is I got objections an' I done said I has."

"Listen, young whelp!" Jeb Terry, broad as a chuck wagon and belligerent as an old bull, advanced a pace. "I asked—"

Pop! Grimes' fist snapped him back on his heels; but the blow just enraged Terry. With a wrathful bellow, he recovered, tugging leather.

THAT was a mistake. Before his gun half cleared the holster, a blast shook the room. Jeb yelled. Blood spurted from the hammer thumb that had been cut by fragments of the bullet that knocked the gun from his hand.

"I'll knock the two of yuh loose from yore eye teeth," growled salty old Gil Stewart, interposing. "Simon, what yuh got agin' Bailey?"

Grimes scratched his tow head and frowned. "Gil, I jest don't exactly know. Yo' might call it a permonition. Kain't prove it, so I ain't sayin'."

To explain would only warn Lem Potts, if he actually were in cahoots with Bailey in some devious piece of skull-duggery. Grimes had a deep-seated grudge against that slick customer; but for Potts' twisted legal advice, Melinda's pappy might have stayed straight, and young love would not have gone up in gunsmoke.

"Yo're right, not sayin' what yuh kain't prove," Stewart grudgingly conceded. "But yo're a damn ornery brat an' ef I was yore uncle, I'd lambaste yuh till yore hind end looked like a Scotch plaid."

"My uncle has been doin' that fo' months, an' ain't another man living what'd have guts to try it," Grimes frigidly retorted, stalking from the room, and the others followed.

Before Stewart could break the news, Bailey chuckled sourly, shrugged, and said, "I done heard most of it. Grimes, I dumno whut yuh got agin' me, but supposin' you come up tuh my room at the White Hoss Hotel? It's only fair tuh tell me in private."

Grimes had to concede the justice of his contentions.

"I'll sho' admire to give yo'all satisfaction, Mistah Bailey," said Grimes. "In two hours, ef it's agreeable to you. I got to see how many of my critters is branded."

"It's Room Four," added Bailey, as Grimes turned toward the street.

The drover's affability in the face of that direct affront convinced Grimes that Bailey was too diplomatic for an honest man; but that was all the more reason to accept his proposition. Bailey could hardly have guessed that Grimes had connected him with Lem Potts; and, in his efforts to placate the stubborn boy, he might unconsciously drop a revealing hint.

Grimes headed for the branding pen at the further side of town; but he at once looped back, and down a side street to find Potts before Bailey met him.

LEM POTTS, he presently learned, was not in his hotel or office. Neither was he at the bank, the jail, nor in

any of the other saloons. It took Grimes only a few minutes to make the rounds. Then he played his last hunch.

Melinda Patton's sorrel mare was no longer at the hitching rack. She must have left town during the conference at the Corkscrew Inn. Grimes reasoned that Potts, who could not be proved guilty of the attempted dry-gulching, would scarcely shake his hocks; instead, he'd merely hide out until the trail herd left Skeleton Creek. And Melinda's ranch house was the one place where he'd expect to stay clear of Grimes, a gun slinger no one in Skeleton Creek cared to face.

Half an hour later, he was approaching the ranch house of the late Hank Patton. Though neat, it already showed signs of dwindling fortunes. The cracking of the rustlers' syndicate had cut heavily into the fortune Melinda's father took in and spent each year. Then he noted hoof prints: rider and a led horse had not long ago galloped toward the house.

One of the beasts had been bleeding. *And the led horse had one cracked shoe;* the sign Grimes had noted at the ambush. Melinda had sent Potts to bushwhack him.

A feud was a feud, and he couldn't blame the gal. But if Potts were carrying on her vengeance—

"Gawd a-mighty!" he groaned, catching all the implications. "She wouldn't *hire* anyone to plug me. She ain't that low. But ef someone was making love to her, she'd have a right to *ask* him to settle me."

He dismounted, stealthily approached the house. He knew all too well in what wing the living room was. As he came nearer, he heard a murmur of voices. The garden afford him adequate cover from observation by any employees who might be about the bunk house or stables.

He was tall enough to get a peep between the curtains that screened the barred windows; and what Grimes saw was more than enough.

The woman must be Melinda. A man was bending over her, drawing her toward him. Her face was thus not visible, but there was no mistaking that riding skirt, well over her knees, nor the dazzling curve of her white legs.

"Oh . . . Lem . . . you mustn't . . . not now. . . . I do appreciate what you've done—what you're doing for me—but I can't—please—"

Grimes drew his .45; but those slim arms, and her incoherent gasps unnerved him. His entire body trembled, and a red haze blurred his eyes. He turned from the window.

Killing Potts in Melinda's house would damn Grimes, who had no right there. If he were jailed, he'd be foiling Uncle Carter, whose old wounds kept him from going with the herd.

". . . Lem, darling—please don't—but tomorrow night—come back at eight—"

Grimes stumbled back to his horse, spurred his beast to a gallop. He'd made a fool of himself, suspecting Bailey. The only thing to do was to apologize for a piece of Georgia orneriness and square himself with Gil Stewart and Uncle Carter's other neighbors.

HIS two hours were almost up when he came larruping into Skeleton Creek. As he dismounted in front of the Corkscrew Inn, he saw Gil Stewart, and said, "Jest fergit what I said about Bailey. I done made a hell of a mistake."

"All right, bub," answered the trail boss. "I'll tell him—"

"I'd ruther tell him myself, Gil. But

Her smile was a crimson challenge.

ef yo' want to tell Jeb Terry and the others, I'd sho' thank you. I feel so't of foolish about this mess."

He stalked toward the White Horse Hotel. Bailey was not at the bar; Grimes therefore ascended the rickety stairs to

the second floor. He tapped at the door of Number Four. A woman bade him enter.

He halted a pace across the threshold, and devoted the next moment to gaping and stuttering. Her blue robe trailed half open, and what little she wore beneath it, accentuated the high spots between waist and collarbone. There were the sleek legs he'd viewed by sunrise; and now he caught more fully the dazzling beauty which distance had that morning withheld. Her smile was a crimson challenge.

"Uh—ur—beg yo' pahdon, m'am—I'm lookin' fo' Mistah Bailey's room—I'm Simon Bolivar Grimes, m'am—"

"Oh . . . Mr. Grimes? If you don't mind—" She paused, basking in his hungry glance, yet seeming to grope for a tactful way of reminding him that she could dress just as well without an audience.

The comb slipped from her fingers. Grimes sank to his knees to retrieve it, and did his best to keep his eyes on the floor and his fingers steady. When he straightened, she was so close that he felt her warmth and roundness against him.

But that was nothing to the next shock! Hungry lips pressed a moist, clinging kiss on his mouth, choking his gasp of amazement. Her arms twined about him, and she arched herself closer, breathing an inarticulate sigh of contentment.

"Lawd, m'am!" He was thrilled and horrified. "You kain't do that—not heah—with that door—"

His mouth went dry and ice raced through his veins when heavy footsteps came clumping down the hall. Then the robe slipped from her shoulders. Sheer horror paralyzed him.

In desperation, he reached for her wrists. She cried out, and while one hand broke away, her feet laced treacherously with his boots, tripping him. He was hopelessly tangled with a writhing armful when the door burst open.

Bailey was at the threshold. At his heel was the marshal, Hob Terrill.

"I'll kill the skunk!" roared Bailey, gun drawn before Grimes could kick clear and protest that it was a frame-up.

"Drop it!" snarled Terrill, knocking the weapon aside just as Grimes got to his own gun. "Yuh fool, yuh'll jest embarrass yore wife ef yuh kill him and have tuh explain why. She ain't been hurt none, not exactly—"

He cocked a critical eye at the hysterical Mrs. Bailey, who was laughing, sobbing, and pouring out an incoherent account of how Grimes had gone wild seeing her state of array when she turned from the dresser. Terrill didn't blame Grimes for having notions; he was getting a few himself; but he sternly went on, "Yo're under arrest fur assault and battery, improper and unfittin' conduck, an' attempted—"

He choked, groping for just the word to use before a lady. But Bailey cut in, "Hell, marshal, ef yuh arrests him, *yuh'll* be advertising my wife's humiliation. Supposin' him and me go outside the city limits and settle this."

"Kain't do it." Terrill was adamant. "I kain't countenance dueling. If a couple gents gets riled an' on the spur of the moment shoots each other, that's jest a act of God. But planning it, with malice aforethought, it's down right iniquitious an' it don't go. Not in Skeleton Crick."

Bailey's wrath subsided. "Maria, I done tol' yuh that that dang open front nightgown—"

"Bart, it's a negligee—"

"That open front nightgown was downright indecent," he persisted. "So

mebbe I shouldn't git too hostile, specially as he ain't done no—no—uh—damage."

GRIMES was sweating, embarrassed, and wrathful. Bailey was a skunk; but having told Gil Stewart that he'd withdrawn his objections, Grimes couldn't back down. And then Bailey said, "Since this here ain't got beyond the four of us, I'll fergit it, ef yuh let me in on the Skeleton Crick pool."

"You damn' ornery polecat!" fumed Grimes.

"Yuh agrees," Terrill cut in, "er by God, I take yuh to the hoosgow."

"I ain't agreein' because Terrill's caught me with my galluses hangin' halfway to my ankles," raged Grimes. "I jest done told Stewart I was mistaken about you, and that I wouldn't vote agin you. So I kain't back down.

"But once this trail herd gits to Kansas, I'm scatterin' yo' guts all ovah a quarter section! Now ef yo' wants to join, yo' ah plumb welcome, suh."

Bailey chuckled. Grimes stamped into the hall. And to forget the morning's humiliation, he spent the remainder of the day at the branding pen.

The following morning, the trail herd surged northward, chuck wagon and remuda at the rear.

Grimes, watching Bailey's critters joining the pool, saw something he had not noticed the previous morning. It became plain enough, once a trick of the early light made him for a second time scrutinize the "BB" on the flank of one of the beasts that supposedly had come all the way from Del Rio.

It was slick and skillful branding; but his resentment and his initial suspicions had sharpened his eyes. The "BB" had not long ago been "HP"—Melinda Patton's brand! Instead of having come from Del Rio, Bailey had by a circuitous route taken Melinda's disguised cattle from her spread and then back again to Skeleton Creek.

Neither could it be wholesale theft; particularly not when Potts, Melinda's lover, had been conferring with Bailey, the morning previous. It was becoming intricate beyond reckoning; each possible answer was contradicted by some other fact.

Gil Stewart, though he had heard nothing of the clash between Bailey and Grimes, kept them far apart, just on the chance that the boy's initial opposition might, in the tension of the long march, cause an outbreak of hostilities. The most even tempers would crack after the first week of long marches, nights broken by guard duty, by alarms real and false, by rumors of rustlers, by threats of stampedes.

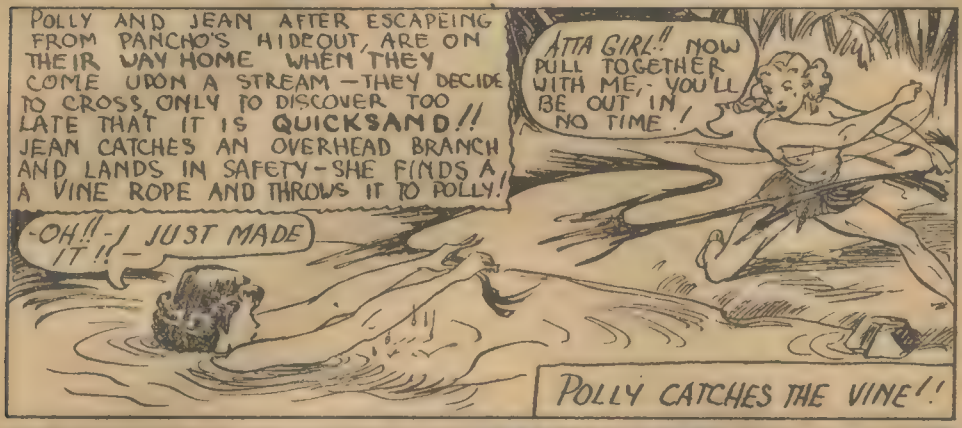
FOR the first night's camp, Grimes was assigned to the third watch. Instead of spreading his tarpaulin near his fellows, he made his bed somewhat apart, and near the river. All day long, whenever a BB could be picked out of the herd, he received fresh confirmation: positively no doubt that they had all been HP. He was still simmering with wrath and humiliation and jealousy; he had to get to the heart of the riddle.

Something crooked was in the wind. He now had two on his list of men to blot out, once Uncle Carter's cattle had been delivered and the money banked: Bart Bailey, and Potts, Melinda's new lover.

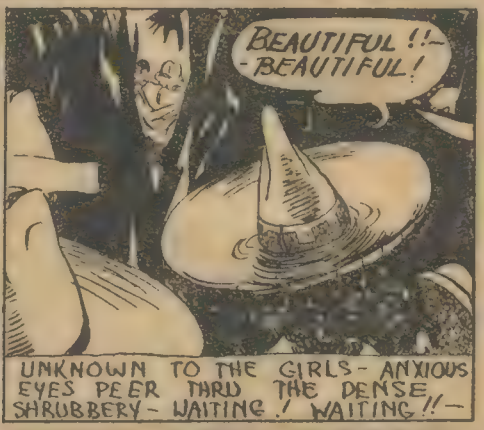
Yet despite his brain wracking, he finally must have dozed. Something was creeping toward him; a silent shape whose advance he had felt rather than heard.

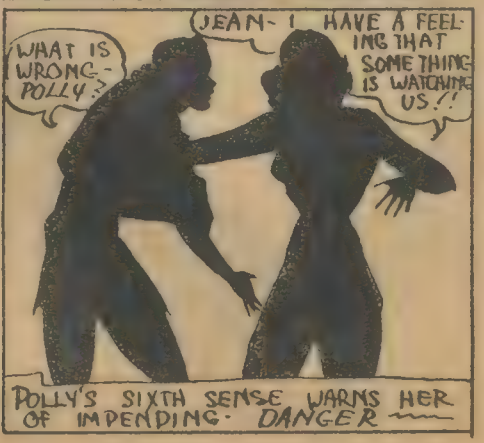
(Continued on page 121)

Polly of the Plains


POLLY AND JEAN AFTER ESCAPEING FROM PANCHO'S HIDEOUT, ARE ON THEIR WAY HOME WHEN THEY COME UPON A STREAM — THEY DECIDE TO CROSS, ONLY TO DISCOVER TOO LATE THAT IT IS QUICKSAND!! JEAN CATCHES AN OVERHEAD BRANCH AND LANDS IN SAFETY - SHE FINDS A A VINE ROPE AND THROWS IT TO POLLY!
ATTA GIRL!! NOW PULL TOGETHER WITH ME, - YOU'LL BE OUT IN NO TIME!
-OH!! - I JUST MADE IT!!-
POLLY CATCHES THE VINE!!

TRUE TO HER WORD - JEAN HAS PULLED POLLY OUT AFTER A HARD STRUGGLE -
OH JEAN! I'M SO GLAD I DIDN'T GET STUCK IN THAT SLOPPY STUFF!!
HERE, POLLY DRY YOURSELF WITH MY BLANKET-





The- DEVIL- is a- WOMAN-

WHO IS THIS MYSTERIOUS - SENORITA DIABLO - ??

WHAT IS HER PURPOSE IN HAVING POLLY LEAD HER BACK TO PANCHO - ??

IS SHE AN ALLY OF PANCHO'S - OR - ENEMY ??

SEE THE AUGUST ISSUE FOR MORE EXITING ADVENTUBES OF POLLY -

She didn't want to marry him and saddle him with the burden of her shiftless old father. But she didn't know that in losing her ranch she would also drive her sweetheart to another woman . . . and at a time when she needed his help more than ever!

NOBODY cared much when Old John Stoner lost the tumbledown Double Box ranch. The people in the town of Smithville knew him for what he was, a hard drinking, roistering old skinflint, shiftless and ornery. Which is why they couldn't understand how he happened to have a daughter like Ellen Stoner. Even Buck Magee couldn't understand that, but after knowing Ellen for years he didn't try to understand it—he took it for granted and was glad of it.

The Double Box lay at the south end of Little Elk Valley, the Circle M at the north. There was as much difference

Ellen screamed at the roar of shots, and Magee slumped forward.

SHEEP HATER

By CLINT MORGAN

between the two ranches as there was between old man Stoner and his daughter. Stoner was lazy, shiftless, content to raise only enough stock to keep him in whiskey. Old Tim Magee, Buck's father, was a typical rancher of the old

school, a fighter, fighting the elements and man alike to increase his herds constantly. He left his son, Buck, two heritages. The ranch and its well stocked ranges, and the will to battle.

A MAN and woman sat beside a little stream sheltered by a row of aspens and willows that whispered overhead. The man had his arm about the girl's trembling shoulders; her head was on his chest. When she ceased sobbing and raised her tear-stained face, he kissed her. Kissed her thoroughly and completely with a surge of feeling that sent their bodies close together, sent something more potent than mere blood winging through the veins of each of them. Her breasts rose and fell tumultuously beneath the worn flannel of her faded shirt. His arms tightened about her and her own fingers moved through the black waves of his hair convulsively.

PRESENTLY, a little hoarsely, as if he had run a long distance, Buck Magee said, "You mustn't say that, Ellen. This isn't the end. Why, honey, after all we've meant to each other, this couldn't be the finish!"

Slowly she pulled away. The top of her shirt had come unbuttoned and the man groaned a little, clenched brown fists instinctively at the sight of the upper slopes of palpitant breasts. She saw his eyes and moved away a little.

"That only makes it harder, dear. Can't you see, Buck; I can't marry you now. We love each other, that's true. Everyone knows it's true. But pride won't let me saddle you with dad and me, both. You know him." Her eyes were cast down. "Sometimes I think he's losing his mind, Buck. The Double Box wasn't much but it was all the home I ever had." Her voice grew bitter. "And he gets drunk and loses it in a poker game to a common gambler, Blackie Miller!" She stumbled to her feet, half blinded by her tears.

For a second longer Buck remained where he was, gazing up at her. It flashed through his mind how long he had known her, how long he had loved her. Why, from the time when she was a little freckled, pig-tailed girl until now, when her hair was roan-colored, touched with gold, when her hips flared in the unmistakable curve of maturity. This was no girl, this was a woman, the woman that he loved.

On his feet he drew her to him again. "What are you going to do, Ellen?"

"I've got a job in the restaurant in town. That'll keep dad and me until we find something better. I've got to go, Buck, I've got to go. Dad's waiting."

But she didn't go. Instead her figure was caught savagely to the sinewy body of Buck Magee, her breasts were flattened against his broad chest, and her lips parted to receive his hard, hard kiss. For long moments he held her, until at last they sank down, side by side in the soft mosses that bordered the stream. There was little conversation, no need for conversation. . . . "Goodbye, goodbye," she murmured with humid eyes, half veiled. Buck Magee kissed her again. Off in the thicket a pair of horses whinnied understandingly while the sun dropped lower and lower. . . .

TWO nights later the boys at the Circle M watched the boss, Buck Magee, ride off toward town arrayed in his best. "And he even shaved," marveled Peg Lawrence, who ramrodded the outfit.

Another puncher groaned. "But did you see that shirt. Was that shirt pink,

or am I drinkin' too much?"

Presently, above the laughter, Peg Lawrence drawled, "Well, boys, since old man Stoner moved the Double Box into town, it looks like we'll miss the boss nights for awhile. Can't say as I blame him. That little Stoner maverick is a right per lot of girl, even if she is the old hellion's daughter."

HALF an hour later Buck Magee stabled his horse, clumped his way awkwardly through the crowded street toward the town's solitary eating place, the Smithville Cafe. Ellen Stoner was nowhere in sight. Patiently he eased his six foot bulk onto a stool near the front, spoke to a few acquaintances, and proceeded to roll and light a quirly while he waited for Ellen.

There was the haze of smoke in the air, the buzz of conversation, the rumble of laughter. And suddenly from one of the rear booths a woman's scream pierced the noise. "You beast, you filthy beast," she cried and Buck Magee went into action. For he knew that voice.

Before he could shove his way through the swirling mob, he saw Ellen's slender body catapult out of the booth, only to be jerked suddenly back from sight by a hairy hand and thick wrist. But in that momentary glimpse, Magee saw that the black uniform had been ripped from her shoulders, that her half bare breasts swayed and quivered tumultuously, white in contrast to the uniform.

A man's laughing voice yelled, "Look over the filly now, boys! She ain't so damned proud now. Do I get that kiss, sweetheart, or do I tear off the rest?" A flying fragment of the torn uniform almost flew into Buck Magee's face as he turned the booth corner like an enraged steer.

Three men were in the booth, two on the far side, laughing drunkenly at the scene. Another one, large, florid of face, had bent Ellen over the littered table, was crushing her half nude body with his own while his thick mouth was seeking hungrily at the base of her throat, the softness of her lips. She clawed at him while he laughed uproariously.

Magee didn't go for a gun. One hand gripped the hairy nape of the man's neck, the other the rear of his cartridge belt. The man was jerked out of the booth in spite of his bulk, jerked out as if flung by some gigantic swing, to end up against the lunch counter. Buck was on him in a minute.

The two strangers who had been with the big man were on their feet, but friends of Magee were fingering gun-belts ominously. The strangers made no move, even when, for the third time, Buck Magee picked the big man from the floor and swung on him with a roundhouse right. The big man sat there stupidly this time, dabbing at the blood from his broken nose.

"That's enough, fellow," he said thickly, and stumbled to his feet. For a minute he stood glaring at Buck Magee, who crouched waiting for further action. But Magee read the little lights of fear in the big man's deepset eyes and a sneer formed about his lips. He said one word. "Git!"

The big man turned on his heel and stalked out. His two friends followed him without a word. Calmly Buck Magee brushed off his palms, sat down again on a stool. Five minutes later, Ellen, white faced, her white loveliness once more covered by a fresh uniform, was on the other side of the counter, waiting.

He looked up, grinned, said, "Ham and eggs, Ellen, eggs straight up." But

his eyes were still narrowed with anger, his thin lips still twitched. Ellen, by God, to the point where she had to put up with something like this! Because a drunken, no-good scoundrel of a father had lost his ranch to a gambler.

AN hour later he was on the street looking for Old Man Stoner, He looked in one saloon after another, was greeted jovially by many friends, took a few drinks, here, a few drinks there, but Stoner wasn't to be found. At last he entered the Silver Eagle, Blackie Miller's place, but even there, Stoner was missing.

Miller's place was pretentious, with a dancehall in the back, where short-skirted women paraded their charms for cowboys and miners alike, in a way that has been done since the world began. A long bar ran down the left of the room, tables ranged the wall on the right. As Buck lifted his glass from the bar for his first drink, someone butted into him violently from behind, caused him to spill liquor on the pink shirt that was the apple of his eye. He put the glass down slowly, turned, stared into the owlish eyes of one of the strangers who had been in the booth at the Smithville House.

The stranger said, "Whyn't yuh quit pushing, pilgrim?" His face bore a nasty snarl, his left hand was shoving at Buck's right arm. Instinct warned Magee. From the corner of his eye, about four feet away to his left, he saw the tense figure of the man's partner, crouched low, fingers hooking clawlike over the butt of a tied down six gun.

Magee's heritage was battle. As the first man swayed toward him again, once more pawing drunkenly at Buck's gun arm, Magee went into action. He'd seen this before, knew what to do. His knee shot up suddenly into the first man's groin, his right hand flashed downward as he leaped quickly to one side, dragging his own gun. Orange streaked, lead split the air from his left and plowed into the bar where he had been standing. His own gun report was like an echo of the first shot, and the stranger to his left went over as if slapped by a gigantic hand.

Buck whirled, but the man he had kneed was still writhing in agony, his tan face almost white. He looked up, keeping his hands well away from his gun, and called weakly for a drink.

FIVE minutes later Buck Magee walked across the saloon to the table where Blackie Miller sat with a big man. A big man whose nose seemed strangely swollen out of all proportion to his face. Magee leaned across the table and spoke to the big man, whose hands were plainly in sight.

"Stranger, I don't know your name nor your business and I don't want to. I see you with those two waddies tonight when we had our little trouble, when you made your little mistake at the restaurant. I don't suppose you had anything to do with this little fracas?"

The big man smiled bleakly. "I never saw those two waddies before, mister. I do my own fighting. I was a little wrong tonight or there might have been more fighting in the restaurant." His eyes glittered; Magee's mouth twisted to a hard straight line, he stepped back from the table, his whole attitude a dare.

Blackie Miller, alarmed, said, "Now, now, don't you two boys fight. Magee, this is Mal Stevens from down Big Bend way. Ain't no use you boys not being friends, seeing as how you're going to be neighbors. Stevens has just

"You've killed my dad!" she cried. Then the rifle came up, streaked the dusk with orange.

bought the Double Box, old man Stoner's old ranch, from me!"

Buck Magee's heart sank. He'd been hunting old man Stoner all evening for one reason, to offer to buy the Double Box back from Blackie Miller for him if the old man would promise to mend his ways. And now this skunk, this fat man, Stevens, had beaten him to it. He turned on his heel and walked away from the table. Stevens smiled after him. The man Magee had kneed, wouldn't meet his eyes in the bar glass. The man with the shoulder wound cursed and spat into the sawdust as Magee went through the swinging doors into the night.

LATER, at her hotel, he had it out with Ellen. He sat in a chair by the window, watched her pace the floor chewing at her lips. She wore a faded silken kimono reaching but slightly below her rounded white knees. She walked away from him and he saw the seductive, liquid motion of her figure beneath the thin material, and when he turned, the low vee revealed the dusky cleft between full, feminine breasts.

"I won't have it," he raged. "You can't work there where every drunken fool that comes along can paw you, and leer at you! You're mine, Ellen, and by God, you're going to marry me!"

"I can't now, Buck; I just can't, and

you know why! I can't saddle you with father. Why, I don't even know where he is now! off in a gutter somewhere, I suppose. You could never get along with him nor he with you!"

"Doesn't it mean anything to you that I love you?" he pleaded. She put her hands on his shoulders. The kimono parted. White softness of flesh was alluring in the moonlight that peered through the open window.

"It means so much," her voice was low, "that if you didn't, I'd die. But can't you wait, Buck?"

His voice was suddenly thick, hoarse, almost a groan as he swept her into his arms. "I can't wait, Ellen; I can't wait any longer. I want to marry you *now!*"

The kimono dropped to the floor in a crumpled heap at her feet. His mouth was hot and feverish, the questing lips dry. He slid an arm beneath the hollow of her knees, another about her back, swung her off her feet. Their lips never parted as he carried her into the shadows, away from the knowing moon that obligingly went beneath a cloud.

NEVERTHELESS Buck Magee went back to the Circle M that night with a bursting sense of ill use. For Ellen stuck by her guns. She refused to marry him and trust to his bounty for her father.

"By God," he raged, roweling the gelding beneath him, "I can be as hard headed as she is! I'm damned if I'll go into town again!"

And he stayed away for two weeks, nor did Ellen send any message. To him they were busy weeks and he drove his men hard and relentlessly, until even they, hard bitten as they were, complained of the boss' stubborness.

Riding the southern boundary of his property one day, moody and morose, he saw in the distance the line of aspens and willows that marked the creek which was the dividing line between his own ranch and that of Mal Stevens. At thought of the man his scowl deepened and he remembered how Stevens had humiliated Ellen that day in the restaurant. He spurred the horse on toward the grove.

Pushing through the undergrowth he saw with some surprise that someone had damned the stream fifty or seventy-five feet farther down, that the usually shallow water had risen until it formed a neat pool.

His horse nickered. There came an answering whinny from the farther bank. Magee slid from his gelding, hand on gunbutt. He wanted nothing of that Stevens' crowd. For a minute he stood staring into the underbrush and trees on the opposite bank. Then, nearly from his very feet a laughing voice said, "Why don't you be nice and turn your head until I get dressed?"

Startled, he peered down. There in the crystal clear water was a woman, only her head of golden hair emerging. Her eyes were violet, wide and challenging, her lips parted in a pleading smile. Slowly Magee flushed, for the water was crystalline, enhanced the lines of the white, white body beneath its surface rather than concealed them. He could glimpse the clear, delicate beauty of her moulded breasts, the slender waist, the faintly swinging legs that glimmered deeper down as she clung to a tree root. For the life of him he could not tear his eyes away, and her voice startled him again.

"Please! I don't know you, and this is embarrassing. Won't you look the other way until I get my clothes?"

He grinned, looked the other way—

but not for long. When he looked again, she was clambering up the farther bank, her body lithe and startlingly white against the greenness of the underbrush. She did not look around; he felt guilty as he watched her climb into riding breeches that clung lovingly, caressingly to full hips, watched her thrust her body into a silken sweater that accented the arrogant, upthrust beauty of her quivering breasts. He rode below the dam and crossed over to where she waited, her lips still parted in that challenging smile.

MOMENTS later he knew her as Lola Stevens, Mal Stevens' sister. She had been in the East for the past few years but had come to spend her vacation at her brother's ranch. There was something about her nearness that challenged Buck, made him fall silent, speechless for moments at a time while he gazed in wonder at her slim seductiveness. Later, when they were seated side by side on the moss and swale, she lay back easily, stretched luxuriantly, so that her breasts loomed like twin mounds of perfection under the silk of her sweater.

Her round white arms were over her head, her eyes still gazing into his, laughing badinage issuing from her red lips. Buck Magee had never known a woman like this!

He was so entranced that he did not hear the horse's hoofs. It was the harsh sneering voice that caused him to leap to his feet. Mal Stevens said, "Go home, Lola. What in hell are you doing here?" And to Buck, "You're on my property, mister. Maybe you better cross the creek."

As if afraid of her brother, Lola mounted her horse, but didn't ride away. Buck, eyes smouldering, paused to roll the brown paper quirly. He squatted on his high heeled Justins, said meaningly, "Stevens, I been aiming to ask you something anyway. My boys tell me you're shipping out most of your cattle. You being a little careful about how they're branded?"

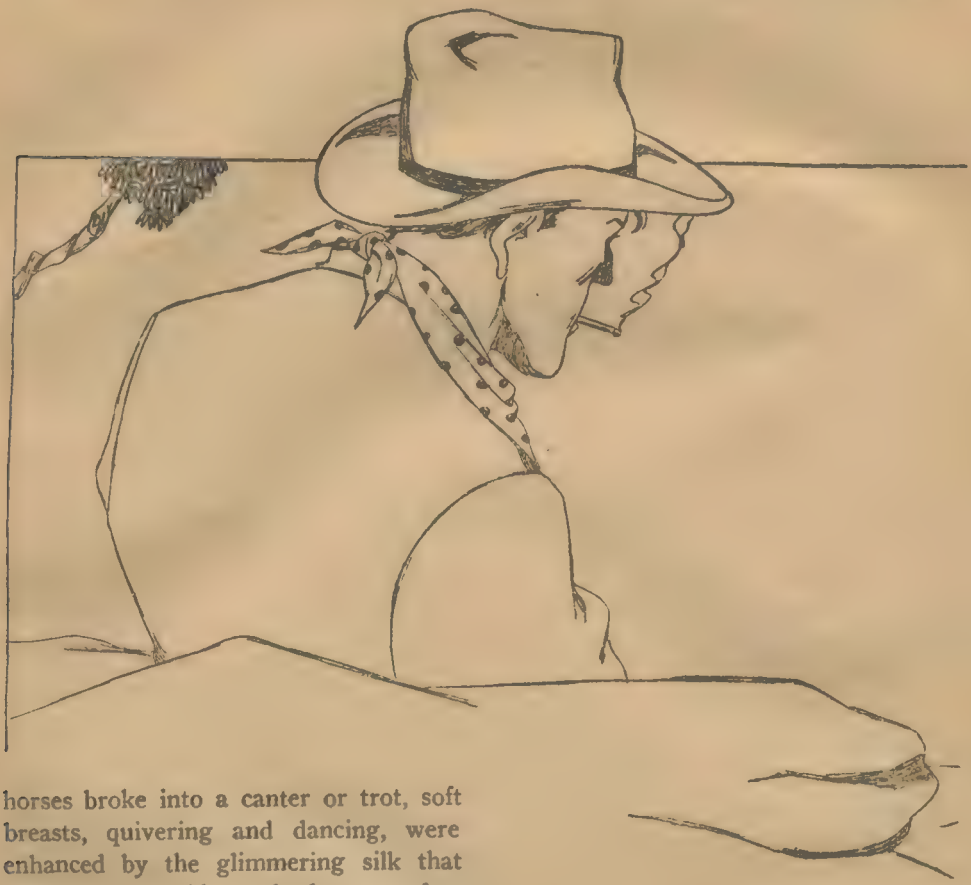
He got to his feet, ready to take the offense for the insult he thought would follow, the insult or the challenge. There was neither. Mal Stevens looked away with his deepset eyes, said steadily. "Sure, Magee. I'm a cowman, not a cow thief. I'm shipping Stoner's longhorns because I"m going to restock with blooded stuff. But all I'm shipping is marked Double Box. Ride over and see for yourself, anytime you want." Buck looked speculatively at the woman, Lola.

She said, "Why don't you, Mr. Magee?" She was demure, challenging again.

"Maybe," said Magee slowly, "maybe I will." He watched them ride away together. When he sniffed the cool breeze, it seemed he could still smell the unmistakably feminine fragrance of the woman. His brows were knit as he rode back across the creek.

IF Ellen Stoner had sent a message the thing might not have happened. But Buck was stiff necked also, he stayed away from town, and more and more he sought out Lola Stevens. The brother, he never learned to like, nor Slade and Jennings, the two shifty-eyed cowpokes that worked for Mal. But there was something about the woman that fascinated him.

When they rode together, she kept close to him, so that their knees were constantly brushing. Inevitably she wore silken sweaters that were cut low in front and fitted tightly, so that when



horses broke into a canter or trot, soft breasts, quivering and dancing, were enhanced by the glimmering silk that accented them. Almost he began to forget about Ellen entirely.

Once he kissed Lola, in the little glade by the brook, and he was suddenly frightened. She had been lying with closed eyes, on the moss, her arms once again far back over her head Peering down at her from his elbow, Buck saw the gentle rise and fall of her bosom, the deep shadow of its valley. Her long lashes were like tiny bird-wings closing her eyes, her lips were moist and parted. Before he knew it, he leaned and kissed her.

Her eyes half opened, her lithe body stirred restlessly. White arms went about his neck to pull him nearer and nearer, arms that possessed amazing strength. He tried to draw away, shocked at the fire and fury of her parted lips that had been so soft, so moist before. She shook her head slowly without taking her lips from his and with a little moan he gathered her to him. . . .

HE never knew afterward how he stumbled to his feet, how he walked away from her without looking back, why he felt so ashamed. He knew she remained as she was, and at his last glimpse of her she was still stretched out lazily, breasts outlined, high and firm, arms beneath her head. Violet eyes watching him quizzically as he clattered away through the bushes, his face flushed.

That night he put on the pink shirt again, determined the thing couldn't go on. It was Ellen Stoner he loved, not this fair, white woman from the east!

"Please—won't you look the other way while I get some clothes?"

But he never got out the door, for Lola Stevens walked in out of the night. He drew back, startled. Without looking either to right or left, she made for him, put her arms around his neck, swayed her seductive form against his. She wore a dress, a shimmering thing of silk that clung to her curves, accentuated them like wet tissue paper.

"Why did you leave me this afternoon?" Her voice was soft, her breasts pressed against his chest. "Don't you know," she whispered, "that after this afternoon I'll always love you?"

There was the subtle scent of her hair, the white nearness of her body, the closeness of her moist, parted lips. In spite of himself he swept her to him, crushed her mouth with his own. Again she shook her head in that way she had, her lips never leaving his. He could hear her breathing, could see the humid fire in her eyes. The davenport was deep and soft on the far side of the

room, padded with skins and rugs. In his arms she was like a white doll, a fiery, breathing doll, whose kisses were wells for him to drown in. There was a flickering pulse at the base of her white throat, blue veins streaking the thin satin of her tumultuous breasts when the gleaming gown started to slide from gleaming skin. . . .

HOW long later he never knew. The hated voice said, "I could shoot you, and no jury in the world would convict me. You damned snake!"

Slowly, shamefaced, Buck got to his feet. Wide-eyed, the woman remained where she was. Mal Stevens' voice boomed again. "Come here, you damned little fool! My sister! Think of it. I ought to kill you, both of you, where you stand. By God, I'll do it!"

The hammer of his gun clicked. Lola leaped from the davenport, sprang in front of Buck Magee, who made no more to defend himself. His head was bowed, his face pale.

"No! No!" she cried shrilly, "don't shoot, please, Mal. Listen! We love each other, we're going to get married. Can't you understand?"

"Understand! I understand plenty!" His tone was bitter. "I looked in the window a minute ago. God, Lola, I suspected something like this when you rode off. That's why I followed you. You, damn you, Magee; *are* you going to marry her?"

She turned swiftly to Magee, her arms about his neck, her body pressed close and tears coming from violet eyes. Buck didn't look at her. Didn't look at Mal Stevens. His voice came from far away, as if it belonged to someone else.

"Yes," he said dully, "I'm going to marry her."

THEY were married the next day in Smithville by a surprised justice. On the day after the marriage, Ellen Stoner and her father left town. Ellen's chin was up as she boarded the train, her eyes were straight ahead defiantly. Old Man Stoner was drunk, as usual. Later, the ticket agent said they bought tickets for Oregon.

And still later, Buck Magee, curious, a little dubious, went to the window through which Mal Stevens had first seen them the night before his sister's marriage. He picked up eight cigarette butts, and wondered vaguely just how long Stevens had peered through that window before entering. Yet he put the doubts behind him and stuck to his bride. And strangely enough found her changed.

Instead of the soft, alluring woman he had fallen for, she turned into a hellcat, a woman impossible to live with unless her every wish was granted. She enjoyed making a fool of him before the cowboys, in driving him nearly to distraction with her physical beauty, revealed by scanty lingerie, tantalizing negligees, then closing the door in his face. But he stuck. . . .

He began spending more and more time in town, drinking, playing with the dancehall girls, gambling with Blackie Miller, even with Mal Stevens. Once over the card table, Stevens asked him, seemingly in innocence, "Buck, what ever happened to that little black headed gal that worked at the restaurant?" Magee had gone suddenly sober, his face whitening.

"Damn you," he grated, "if you ever mention her name with that filthy tongue of yours, I'll cram it down your fat throat."

That was the night he won eleven thousand dollars in cash money from

Blackie Miller, another three thousand from Stevens. His luck ran phenomenally for weeks on end. And his heavy drinking kept up with it.

"Damn it," Peg Lawrence used to tell the boys, "the boss is gone to hell. It's that dame at the house that's done it! Something has to happen or he's a lost man."

Something happened.

THREE o'clock in the afternoon, Buck Magee was dozing in his chair at a table in the Silver Eagle. A cowpuncher dismounted before the place, hurried in, a note in his hand. Blearily Buck Magee shook himself awake, focused his eyes on the feminine writing. It said:

"Buck:

Mal has just sent word that sheep are pouring into the valley over our pass, starting to take up the west side. He says if you're a cowman, come at once and help blow hell out of the dirty sheep drivers.

Lola."

At five o'clock in the afternoon, the sun was a ball of fire hanging over the western range. Buck Magee was riding hell for leather for the pass through which the sheep had come. He had enough liquor inside him to make him flame with anger at the gall of anyone attempting to run sheep on the west range, even though the rocky ground was worthless for cattle. Buck Magee was a cowman, through and through. He hated the sight and the very thought of woollies.

He topped the first rise, stopped a minute and gazed down into the little valley below. By God, Mal Stevens had beaten him to it! There in the little valley were the inert bodies of at least a hundred slaughtered sheep. Stevens knew the proper medicine for sheep herders!

Buck clattered down into the valley, stopped and alit from his gelding, aglow with satisfaction. A ewe with a broken leg attracted his attention. He drew his six shooter, put the ewe out of its misery just as a feeble groan came to him. "Water, for the love of God, water."

He found the dying man behind a clump of bushes—and grew suddenly sober. *It was old man Stoner!* The old man groaned once more, stiffened, and relaxed. Stupified, Magee arose, the smoking gun in his hand. Had Stevens killed the old man, and what was he doing here, anyway?

There was a clatter of hoofs behind him, coming out of the *arroyo*. A group of riders, not Stevens' men, but a group with a familiar figure at their head.

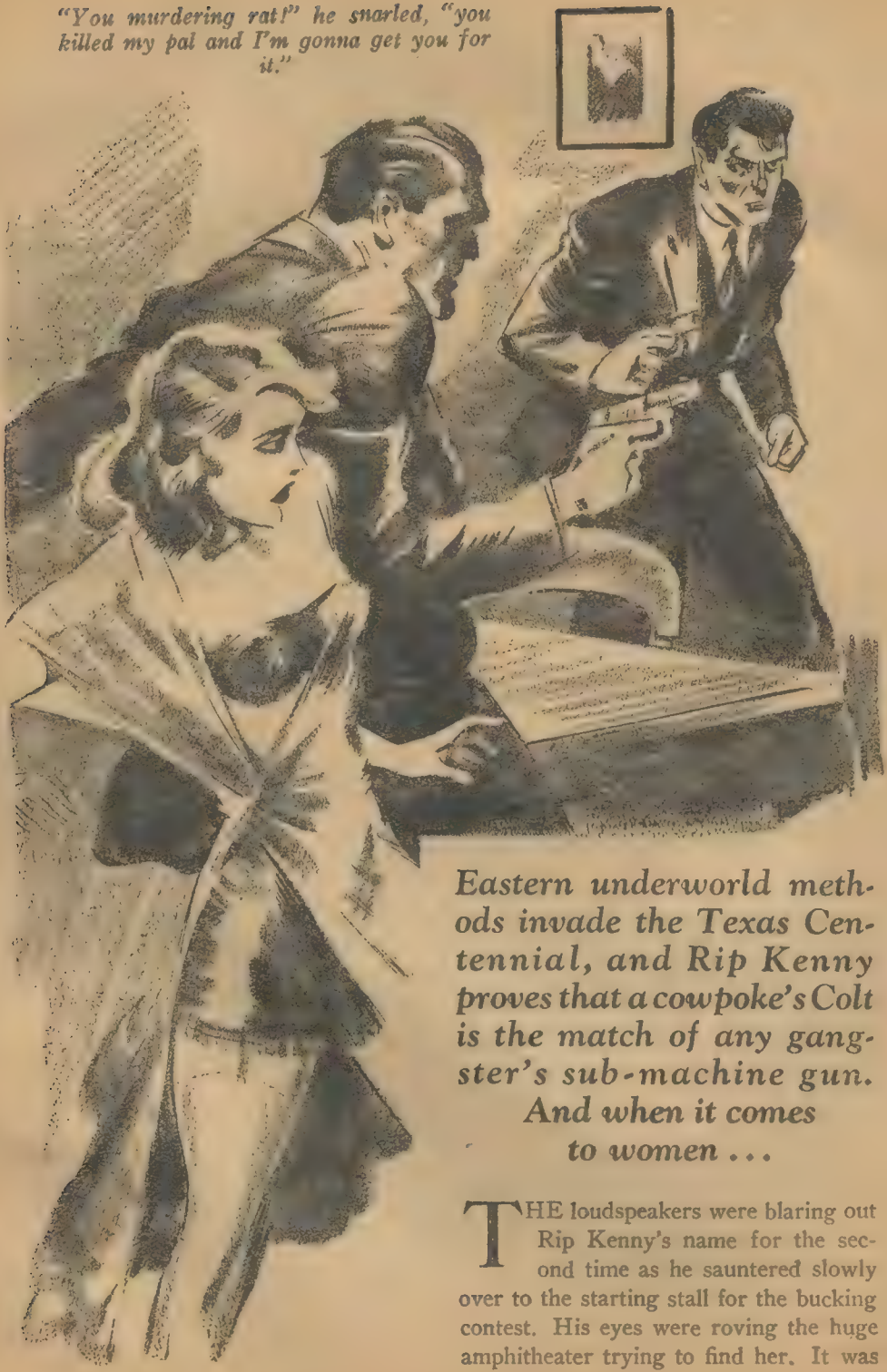
"Ellen!" he gasped. "You!" It was Ellen, a rifle across her saddle bow. She tossed her head.

"Why not? This is tax-paid land, public range. Dad and I had to do something, so we're bringing in the woollies for a syndicate because we knew the way. We—"

Horrified she gazed down att he dead man. "Dad! Dad!" She was off her horse in a moment, rifle still in hand. Slowly she arose, her eyes filled with scorn, hate. For the first time she seemed to see the dead sheep lying about. *"You've killed my Dad!"* The rifle suddenly came up, streaked the dusk with orange. Buck Magee fell to the ground.

HE awakened sometime after nightfall, a burning sensation in his left

(Continued on page 103)



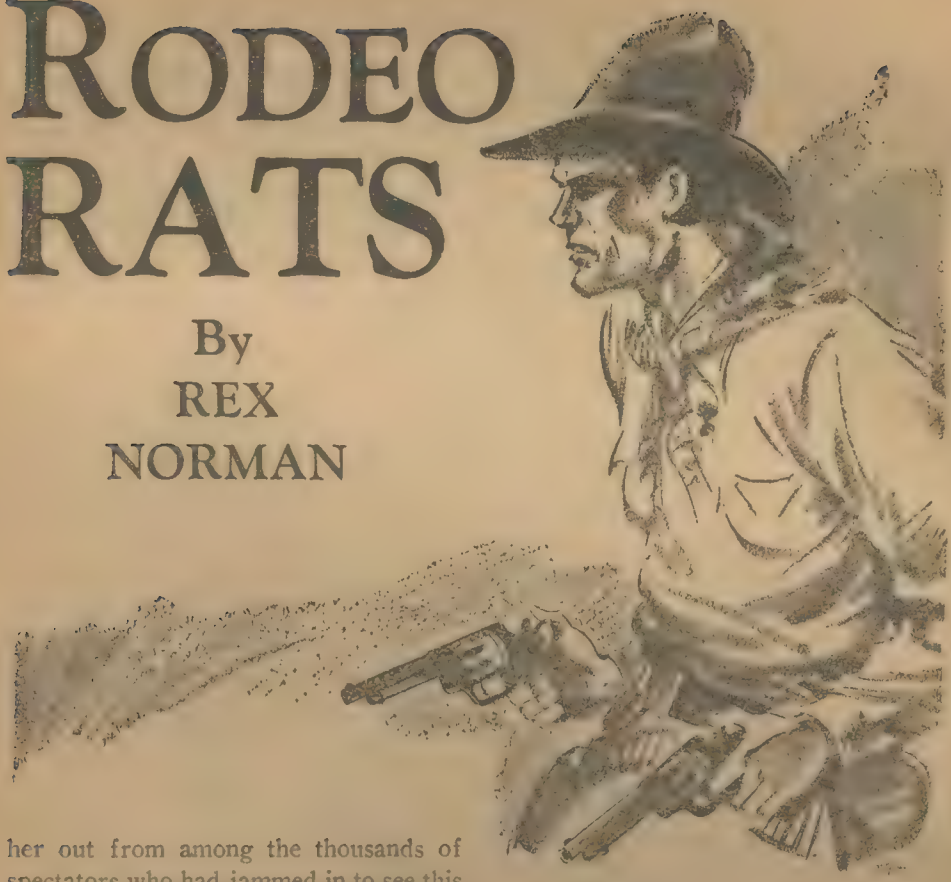
"You murdering rat!" he snarled, "you killed my pal and I'm gonna get you for it."

Eastern underworld methods invade the Texas Centennial, and Rip Kenny proves that a cowpoke's Colt is the match of any gangster's sub-machine gun. And when it comes to women . . .

THE loudspeakers were blaring out Rip Kenny's name for the second time as he sauntered slowly over to the starting stall for the bucking contest. His eyes were roving the huge amphitheater trying to find her. It was plumb loco to think he'd be able to pick

RODEO RATS

By REX NORMAN



her out from among the thousands of spectators who had jammed in to see this biggest rodeo in Texas' history, but he had to try. She wasn't in the box she'd been in for three days running but maybe she was sitting somewhere else, waiting to give him a smile of encouragement.

He was at the stall now and the starter was yelling at him for holding everything up but Rip paid him no mind. He dropped the cigarette from his mouth, crushed it out carefully and deliberately, and started to climb up into the stall . . . . and then he saw her!

She was sitting in a ringside box just under the band stand, a bit to the right of where she'd sat on the three previous occasions. She was leaning forward expectantly, her pretty face all keyed up with excitement, yet he sensed that she was afraid for him. For him, Rip Kenny . . . . and he'd never even spoken to her!

Almost in a daze he dropped into the saddle, clamped his legs around the bronc's middle, and gave the signal. The gates swung open with a crash and, with the startled leap of a jack rabbit primed to the ears with loco weed, the horse under him shot out into the middle of the ring. Rip came out of his day dream with a jolt that shook every bone in his body.

Without looking down, he knew he had drawn One Eyed Dynamite, the meanest, orneriest, buckingest bronc in the whole string. The horse that had thrown every man in the contest at least once and broken more bones than there were dollars in the prize money!

Dynamite was spinning slowly now

as if just warming up and Rip could feel, even through the thickness of his boots and chaps, the bronc's muscles starting to bunch. He clamped his legs together until they seemed almost to be riveted to the bronc's sides; then, just as he was starting to tighten up on the bit, Dynamite checked his spinning and went off the ground with all four feet in a perfect sun-fish.

THERE was a cold smile on Rip's face as his body gave and his legs gripped the bronc's heaving barrel even tighter. But he stuck in the saddle like a burr. His hat was off and in his hand now, not for show but to help him keep his balance. Again the bronc sun-fished, then went into a series of bucks and spins, swapping ends so fast that he made even the spectators dizzy. They were all on their feet now, roaring and cheering Rip's magnificent performance.

Up went the bronc on his rear legs and Rip started to slip his feet from the stirrups, getting ready to jump clear if he went over backwards. Then, just as the timer's gun went off to signal that the two minutes were up, just as Rip realized that he had stayed the time limit and won, just as the riders started closing in to swing him off, the horse, maddened by his inability to throw this rider, gathered himself together and sped headlong at the barrier as if to dash against it.

The cold smile still on his face, Rip saw the sea of white faces rush toward him like a breaking wave. His eyes were fixed on one face in particular, hers. Even at that moment he found time to hope that none of his blood would splash over her and soil her pretty clothes; then, even as she screamed, the locoed horse swerved and struck the barrier with his side.

There was a snap as the carelessly buckled cinch snapped and the heavy saddle came whirling off the brute's back. Rip felt himself sailing through the air and tried to twist himself so he'd land on his feet. He felt a heavy blow on the side of his head and everything started fading away from him.

He didn't go out completely but it was as if everything became far away, distant. Soft arms were about him, a yielding, resilient bosom was cushioning his head. One of his hands was resting on a rounded knee, soothed by the sheer silk that covered it. He was afraid to move for fear it was all a dream that would vanish when he awoke. Almost timidly he opened his eyes and saw her face bending above him, her lovely eyes dewy.

"You poor, poor darling!" she whispered. "Are you badly hurt?"

Rip stared at her for a long moment. "Listen," he said, "if this is a dream, I've gotta make the most of it. I've had nothing but you on my mind since I first came here and saw you. What's your name and where are you staying?"

Her eyes widened and then she flushed lightly. "My name's Myra Lorraine," she said hesitantly. "And I'm staying at the Hotel Houston, but don't you think. . . ?"

"Hotel Houston!" interrupted Rip eagerly. "Me, too! I'm in Room 239. When can I see. . . ?"

"Rip! Rip, ole pal! Are ya all right?" interrupted a voice, and Rip looked up, scowling, into the worried face of Slim Rorty, his pal and owner of the K Star Ranch at which Rip was foreman.

"You saddle-faced son!" growled Rip. "I never did see anyone with a better knack for turnin' up at the wrong time!"

Myra flushed again and drew back a little from Rip as he got to his feet and

felt himself tentatively. Slim took off his hat and bowed.

"I hope you'll excuse him, miss," he said to Myra, with the smoothness and ease of his Eastern background. "But when they get tossed on their heads, they usually stay wacky for a while." He turned to Rip with his wide grin. "Come on, Bright Eyes. Let's collect your prize money. What you did to Dynamite is nobody's business."

RIP vaulted over the barrier into the ring and tried to bow to Myra the way Slim had. "Goodbye, Miss Lorraine," he said uncertainly, his eyes devouring her face and the lovely lines of her body as she leaned toward him, a faint smile on her face. "I'll be seeing ya . . . real soon!" and he started to walk across the ring toward the judge's stand, Slim at his side. There was a look of dazed happiness on his face that made Slim chuckle quietly.

"So that's the one you've been mooning about, eh?" he asked. "She's an eye filler, all right. Now, where the devil . . . ?" Then he snapped his fingers. "I've got it! She's Myra Lorraine, the Bubble Dancer from the Rodeo Night Club next door!"

"What?" Rip stopped dead. "That sweet and pretty gal!" He grabbed Slim by the arm. "Listen," he gritted, "if you're ribbing me, Slim. . . ." Then his voice trailed off. It was just incredible that that lovely and simple girl should make her living by exposing her shapely body in tantalizing flashes to the avid and bestial eyes of all the men at the Texas Centennial Exposition.

Slim's face had softened as he saw the anguish in Rip's eyes. "Buck up, pardner," he said. "She's probably straight as a die. It's only that. . . . Well, I just hope she has nothing to do with that racket that's being pulled on the boys here."

"Racket? What racket's that?" asked Rip.

"Well, you know I've been out West here for only three years," answered Slim. "Technically, I'm the owner of the K Star, but actually you're the boy who runs it. I'm learning the cattle business fast, thanks to you, but when it comes to rackets and confidence games I could give you aces and spades. You've heard some of the boys around here talking about how they've lost everything but their shirts in some little two-handed poker games?"

"Wal, I sorta heard rumors," admitted Rip. "But what's it all about?"

"A sucker meets up with a pretty gal," explained Slim, "and she makes a date to meet him in her room. When he gets there, she isn't there but there's another gent waiting who explains *he* had a date with her too. He suggests that while they're waiting for her to show up and decide which one she's going to spend the evening with, they play a couple of rounds of cold hands. The girl never does arrive and when the puncher leaves later that night, he's minus every cent he had in his jeans. The man he'd been playing with is a professional gambler using a marked deck."

"And you mean you think maybe Miss Lorraine is a decoy?" asked Rip, a cold light in his eyes.

"I don't mean or think anything," answered Slim. "I just mentioned it, casual like."

RIP, stripped to the waist, wiped the shaving cream off his face, then reached over and turned on the shower, the long muscles rippling on his lean body. Wonderful gadgets, showers. He'd have to speak to Slim about get-

ting one for the ranch. That boy sure knew how to live. It had been Slim's idea that they come to the rodeo at the Centennial and take a crack at the prize money. It had been his idea that they stay at a good hotel like the Houston instead of at one of the less expensive ones.

Rip shook his head, grinning, as he pulled off his boots. That boy was so plumb big-hearted that it would be no surprise if he was aiming to make him, Rip, a full partner in the K Star ranch. Here he was with Slim paying him a handsome salary, taking him to Dallas for the Centennial, and now. . . He turned with a startled yell as he heard the bathroom door slam open. He started to curse Slim to a slow gravy for coming on him that way; then his eyes bugged out of his head. There stood, not Slim, but Myra Lorraine!

Her face was pale, her eyes wide with terror. Her splendid rounded breasts heaved under the low cut bosom of her evening dress. Rip gaped open mouthed at her, forgetful for the moment, that he was wearing nothing but a pair of violently striped shorts.

"For God's sake," she whispered, "hide me!"

Rip heard the outer door of the suite bang open and the sound of hurrying feet and male voices. He whirled around and pointed to the shower were a cloud of steam was rising from the hot water that hissed down behind the closed shower curtain.

"Quick!" he snapped. "In there!"

Without a moment's hesitation, clothed as she was, Myra parted the curtains and leaped into the shower, flattening herself against the tiled wall. Rip leaped in after her and zipped the shower curtains closed. He had just about had time to take one more puzzled look at her, to see the water drench her and see the wet fabric of her dress become almost transparent, suggesting the pink of her lovely body and moulding itself revealingly to every curve of her figure, when above the hiss of the shower he heard the voices sounding nearer. Whoever it was that she wanted to hide from was in the bedroom now.

Reluctantly, he tore his eyes from the gorgeous body of the girl to look at her pale face. Her eyes were wide with terror. Then he thrust his wet head out through the shower curtain.

"Who the hell's trampling around in there?" he yelled.

The voices stopped and the bathroom door opened. Three men stood there looking in at him. Rip recognized one, a burly gent with cauliflower ears, as the house detective. One of the other men was tall and slim, the other short. Both were very dark and dressed in smooth city clothes with ties that matched their shirts. Rip scowled at them.

"What's the idea of bustin' in here?" he growled.

"Did a woman come in a minute ago?" asked the house dick. "Young, blonde, pretty?"

"Step right into the shower here," said Rip coldly. "That's where I keep my harem." He made a move to pull back the shower curtain and felt as much as he heard Myra gasp behind him. The dick scowled.

"Don't get wise, cowboy," he said. "This is serious!"

"You're damn' right, it's serious!" snapped Rip. "I knew there was running water in every room of this hotel but I didn't expect running flat-feet! Now vamos before I lose my temper and push you down the nearest receptacle." And he looked meaningly to his right.

Even as he sailed through the air, he knew he had won.

THE taller of the dark gents stepped in front of the purpling house detective.

"Don't get your mad up, buddy," he said smoothly. "A man was just murdered and the dame that did it ran down the hall. Your door was open and we thought she might have ducked in here. I guess we were wrong." He turned to go, then hesitated. "The man who was shot looked like a puncher," he went on. "Maybe you could identify him. We'll be waiting across the hall in Room 270 when you get dressed." They went out, leaving the bathroom door open.

"Which'll be right soon," Rip called after them as he stepped, shorts dripping, from the shower, and then in sheer deviltry added, "as soon as I turn this shower cold." And, pulling the curtain closed, he turned the valve and let down a spray of icy cold water. Myra gasped as its sudden chill struck her drenched body, but she made no other sound, only glared at him indignantly.

A few moments later, drawing a towel back and forth behind his broad shoulders, Rip shot one question at the girl who still hid behind the drawn curtains of the shower, now turned off.

"Did you do it?"

"No!" she answered. Rip nodded and went into the bedroom to dress.

HE WAS still buttoning up his shirt when he rapped on the half open door of Room 270. Out of sheer force of habit, his six-guns were again buckled around his hips.

"Come in!" called the house detective's hoarse voice and Rip pushed the door and went in. The three of them were standing in the center of the room. The taller of the dark gents nodded to him.

"Didn't have a chance to introduce myself before," he said. "My name's Nick Ettore." He gestured toward his companion. "This is Tony Ricco."

Rip nodded shortly. "I'm Rip Kenny," he said. "Where's the body?"

Without a word the three moved aside. Rip's heart froze suddenly into a gelid lump and his every muscle seemed to lock tight in horror. There lay the body of Slim Rorty, his boss and his pal!

It was several seconds before Rip could speak. "Who did it?" he gritted finally.

Nick Ettore shrugged. "This is Myra Lorraine's room," he said. "We heard a shot and came running up the hall. Just as we got to the door, she came dashing out. Then, Flynn, the house detective, came up and we went in. There was the body. Figure it out for yourself."

Rip said nothing but stooped to look at his pal's corpse. The bullet hole in his temple was small, probably .25 calibre. He glanced up from under lowered lids and saw Ettore and Ricco looking around the room as if searching for something. Ricco had moved over to the desk and was shuffling through some papers.

"Looking for something?" asked Rip.

Ricco started. "Looking for something that might be a clue," he answered, his eyes shifting. Rip studied him for a minute, then he dropped his eyes and looked around narrowly. He saw the corner of a piece of paper just showing under the couch and he pulled it out.

"Like this?" he said. He looked at the folded paper and started. It was a new deed to the ranch naming him, Rip Kenny, as partner! Slim must have had it drawn up just before he was killed!

"Yes!" said Ettore eagerly. "Let's see it."

"That's all right," answered Rip. "I'll hold on to it."

"What do you mean, you'll hold on to it," snarled Ricco. "Dat's evidence! Turn it over!"

"I said I'd hold on to it," said Rip flatly, starting to put it in his pocket. He nodded toward Slim's body. "He was my partner."

Ricco and Ettore both widened their eyes and exchanged looks, then Ettore nodded slightly and Ricco's hand dived inside his coat. When it came out there was a wicked looking automatic in it, leveled at Rip's middle.

"And *I* said turn it over," he spat. He held out his hand. "Give, Big Boy!"

Rip looked from the gun to Flynn, the house detective, but the dick avoided his eyes, looking down at his grimy finger nails and whistling between his teeth, as if what was taking place was no concern of his.

"You know what this is, don't you?" said Rip. "Robbery!"

"Will you give it to me or do you

want lead poisoning?" shouted Ricco, his face convulsed with rage.

"Sure, I'll give it to you," said Rip and his hand started to go out to the gunman, extending the deed. Then his eyes went past Ricco's shoulder to the open door and a half smile came to his lips as if he saw someone standing there. He jerked his head. Ricco fell for the old trick.

With a snarl, he wheeled around, gun ready . . . and as soon as he started turning, Rip played for his gun. His hand went down with the speed of a striking rattler and snapped the six-gun from its holster. Even as his forefinger lifted the barrel clear, his thumb had hooked back the hammer and fanned off a shot. The slug caught the gunman's automatic smack in the middle of its frame and knocked it out of his hand. With a yell of pain, Ricco started leaping up and down, wringing his numbed fingers. Rip motioned him away from the door with the smoking barrel of his Colt and stepped out into the hall.

"Stay where you are!" he warned them. "My trigger finger's itchin'." And then he stepped backward down the hall, gun ready, until he reached his own door. Once there, he leaped inside and slammed it.

WHEN he turned around, he saw Myra standing in the bathroom doorway. She had taken off her wet clothes. Only the briefest of wispy step-ins—too sheer to hold water—clung damply about her hips. A bath towel was wound around her perfect form like the sari of the Balinese women. Only a hint of her rounded swelling breasts peered coyly from above the rough toweling while her long, tapering and shapely legs showed underneath it, breathtakingly. Her face was pale, her eyes wide, as she watched Rip holster his gun.

"What happened?" she asked.

"That's what I want to know," gritted Rip. "The guy who was plugged. . . ." his voice choked, "was my pal!"

She uttered a soft cry and stepped forward, putting her hand on his arm.

"Oh, I'm sorry," she said. "Terribly sorry!"

He looked deep into her wide blue eyes and saw real pain there but no trace of guilt.

"All right," he said. "Skip it and tell me what you know."

"Well," said Myra. "I'm a Bubble Dancer. Do you know what that is?" Rip nodded curtly and she went on. "Nick Ettore brought me out here to the Exposition from New York. He owns several concessions here but his biggest one is the Rodeo Night Club. The dancing I do is bad enough but Nick isn't satisfied. . ."

Rip's jaw tightened. "What else does he want?" he asked.

"What the other girls do, but somehow I can't," said Myra. "I'm supposed to flirt with men, invite them to my room. Then I'm supposed to sneak away, not show up. I think Nick sends a gambler up to the room and he cheats the men out of their money."

"I see," said Rip ironically. "And you never smile at men. Not even at me."

"No, I don't!" flashed Myra indignantly. "You . . . . well, first of all you were different. From the first time I saw you at the rodeo, I. . . " Her voice trailed off.

"You what?" prompted Rip.

"Well, first of all, I liked you. Second, I thought you might help me. You see, I'm under contract to Ettore, but I thought if I could get a cowboy, some-

one who wasn't afraid of Ettore, to go to him with me and say we were going to get married, then maybe Ettore would release me from my contract."

"I get it," said Rip. "Now what about . . . . Slim?"

"Well, I was coming back to my room and I thought I heard a shot, but I didn't pay any attention to it. I got to the door and looked in and there was the body lying in the middle of my room. I stood there for a moment, sort of dazed; then I heard footsteps and saw Ettore and Ricco and the house detective coming down the hall. I was scared. I started to run, but I saw the number 239 on a door and remembered you had told me that was your room . . . and that's all."

"Slim knew I wanted to see you and probably went to your room to check up on you, make sure you were all right. He always treated me like a kid in some ways," said Rip, thinking aloud. "Then maybe one of Ettore's stooges or Ettore himself came in and got him into a card game. He discovered that the game wasn't straight and made a play for his gun. Then he got shot. After that, whoever killed him must have seen the ranch deed and the new one that made me half owner.

"If they destroyed the new one, no one would know of its existence and they could claim that they had won the ranch from Slim in a card game. But they were interrupted by you and tried to pin the murder on you. Then they went back to the room to find the new deed and *I* interrupted them."

"Who is 'them'?" asked Myra.

"Who could it be?" answered Rip. "Ettore and Ricco. Maybe Flynn too, but I think Ettore just pays him to keep him from interfering in the card games. Now my job is to find a .25 calibre gun, the one that killed Slim." His eyes were cold and hard as ice. "What are you going to do?"

"I'm going back to the night club and do my dance," said Myra. "That running away was foolish. They haven't anything on me, and if they have, I'm going to face it."

"Good idea," said Rip. "I've heard tell about these here Bubble Dances. I'll come and watch you."

"To the night club?" asked Myra, wide eyed. "No! You mustn't! It's dangerous. All Ettore's gunmen from New York will be there. They'll kill you!"

"Wal, I dunno about that," drawled Rip. "Besides, I got my heart set on seeing you do that Bubble Dance. It must be mighty pretty."

MYRA was standing close to him, looking appealingly up into his face; the twin mounds of her bosom were heaving with excitement under the confining folds of the towel, which only half covered what it was intended to hide.

"Please!" she pleaded. "For my sake! If they hurt you, I . . I couldn't stand it!"

Rip's heart was starting to beat faster in response to the alluring nearness of her. His temples were throbbing madly, but he managed to smile. "I'm mighty set in my ways," he said. "I still think I'll come."

Myra stepped back a pace and Rip's heart seemed to go out with her. She was so completely, entirely desirable.

"If . . . if it's the Bubble Dance you want to see," she faltered, "then I'll do it for you . . . here!" She ran to the corner of the room and switched on the radio. The soft strains of a dance orchestra floated through the air.

Rip gazed at her open-mouthed as she stood there, a flush crimsoning her cheeks but a look of determination in her eyes. Then suddenly she bent and picked up a large cushion from the sofa. She held it in front of her and let the towel drop. Poised before him on the tips of her bare toes, naked as Eve, except for the wispy silk underthing which circled her middle, the greater part of her loveliness concealed from him only by the pillow in her hands, she took his breath away.

Then smoothly, gracefully, she went into her dance, more alluring, more se-

"The bubble dance is like this," she said. "But don't come to the club. They'd hurt you."

ductive than it could possibly be on the dance floor of a crowded night club. She whirled, spun, pirouetted, turning this way and that in front of him to the lilting strains of the music, yet always keeping the cushion between him and her magnificent, more than half nude body.

He could glimpse the beauty of one bared breast, a rounded supple thigh, a narrow, exquisitely modeled, waist, but there would be only a glimpse, and then the pillow would cut off his vision and her body would be turned in some new and exotic pose.

Rip's heart was choking his throat. There was a dry taste in his mouth. He had known women before but never one like this one who postured before him and drove him mad. She must have felt his emotion also and it must have awakened a response in her, for her movements were becoming slower, more languourously alluring. Her efforts to cover herself were becoming more half hearted. She let his eyes linger longer on her and her breath was coming faster, her breasts heaving more deeply.

RIP could stand no more. With a choked cry he leaped forward and snatched the pillow from her. He held her at arms' length for the space of a heart beat, devouring her scantily clad loveliness with his eyes; then he crushed her to him.

She made no effort to hold him off; instead her arms stole up around his neck and she pressed herself against him. He bent down, found her mouth and glued his to it. Her lips were warm, moist and slightly parted. Her nubile breasts were crushed against his panting chest and he could feel the excited throbbing of her heart. . . Her eyes were half closed, her breath a tremulous flutter. . . .

IT WAS quite a bit later before either spoke. Then. . .

"Darling," whispered Myra. "You saw me do my dance. You won't come to the night club now, will you? I'm afraid."

Rip grinned crookedly. "Sure I saw the dance, honey," he said. "And I liked it fine. But I'll have to come to the club anyway. You see, what I was most interested in seeing was the bubble."

* * * *

RIP lounged back of the table in the darkest corner of the Rodeo Night Club and slowly turned his glass on the checkered cloth that covered it. The gesture was mechanical for his eyes were on the center of the floor where Myra, in the hot center of a spot light, was slowly and gracefully gyrating her body in her Bubble Dance to the soft music of the orchestra.

"For the last time," said Rip to himself.

Six almost naked girls twisted their bodies as a background for Myra's tantalizing movements, half seen through the translucency of the huge bubble in her hands, and though Rip could feel his pulses hammering at the sight of her, his response was divided. Half of what he felt was rage at the avid, greedy looks with which the men around him devoured her. Then the music stopped and, bowing to the thunderous applause that acclaimed her, Myra slipped through the door that led to the back and private portion of the night club. Rising casually to his feet, Rip followed her.

Just inside the passageway that led to the dressing rooms, Rip stopped. Ricco, his back to him, was standing in an open doorway and beckoning to Myra.

"Come in here a minute, kid," he

called familiarly. "The boss wants to see you."

Myra hesitated a moment, her eyes on the gunman's face, then with a look of determination, she wrapped the dressing gown more closely about her and went toward him. She did not see Rip but went directly into Ettore's private office, Ricco following her and shutting the door after them both.

Rip slipped down the hall to the door silent as a ghostly Indian in his high horseman's boots. He opened the door just a crack.

". . . . glad you showed up tonight," Ettore's oily voice was saying. "You're in a bad spot, you know, but I'm the boy who can help you out."

"How?" asked Myra shortly.

"Well, Ricco, me, and Flynn were the only ones who saw you come out of your room after that punk was shot . . . . and Flynn's right in my pocket. We could all keep quiet, you know, if. . . ."

"If what?" asked Myra uncertainly.

"How about giving me a little kiss first?" said Ettore, his voice huskier, as if the sight of her barely covered loveliness was proving too much for him.

"No!" said Myra.

"No?" repeated Ettore in what was almost a snarl. "You'll think that's nothing before you're through. I've had my eye on you for a long time, baby, and now I think I've got you where I want you!"

"Never! Not if I die for it!" retorted Myra, but there was a note of hysteria in her voice.

"By God. . . ." husked Ettore, then stopped at the sound of a chair sliding back violently and a scuffling noise.

Rip's mouth was straight as a sword slash as he pushed open the door with a bang.

Ettore was standing near his desk, one arm around Myra's struggling body, the other gripping the front of her dressing gown as if to tear it from her. Ricco was against the far wall, his rat eyes glittering balefully, his hand inside his coat.

"Wal," drawled Rip. "Is yer boss getting ready to congratulate ya, honey?"

Ettore's arm dropped from around Myra and she leaped away from him and ran to Rip, pressing her body against his.

"Congratulate her on what?" snarled Ettore, motioning to Ricco who slowly withdrew his hand from inside his coat, but still stood there tense and ready.

"Why, didn't Myra tell you?" asked Rip, surprised. "She and me's gonna get married. We thought we'd come in and tell you and have you tear up her contract."

A COLD, evil smile spread over Ettore's face. "The roping contest finals take place tomorrow," he said slowly. "Are you entered, cowboy?"

Rip nodded casually, but his eyes were cold, never leaving Ettore's face.

"Well, if you want to be there," went on Ettore, "scram! And scram right now!"

A hurt look spread over Rip's face. "Wal, tangle me with barbed wire, Mr. Ettore," he said in hurt accents. "You don't mean you ain't gonna release Myra, do you?"

"That's just what I mean!" gritted Ettore. "Now beat it before I have some of my boys dust you off!"

Rip looked down sadly at Myra. "Shucks, honey," he said. "Then I guess we can't do anything about it." He ignored the sudden surprise and pain he saw come into her eyes at what she

(Continued on page 107)

HELL IN

The break came. As Miguel staggered from the doorway, Rosson fired.

Jeff knew that if he were lynched for killing the girl's father, no one would track down the real murderer. But when he loosened his guns to save the girl and himself, he came on one surprise after another

HIDDEN VALLEY

By KING SAXON

JEFF CORBIN stood up in his stirrups and looked ahead as Smoke, his steel grey gelding, stopped, flared out his nostrils, and sniffed wind. The arroyo down which they had been riding curved slightly to the left and, beyond the turn in the bare, stony gully walls, Jeff could see the dark green of trees.

"Yep, there's water there, pardner," he drawled, stroking the neck of the big horse. "'Bout time, too. This shore is a dry range." Clipping the cayuse with his chap-covered legs he sent him forward.

When they got around the curve in the arroyo, he reined Smoke in again and looked around. Below him was as pretty a valley as he had ever seen. High hills circled it and the feathery plume of a waterfall plunged from the far side into a deep pool that became a smooth flowing stream farther along, twisting across the valley's floor. Big clumps of cottonwoods grew along the stream banks, and far off to the right Jeff could catch a

glimpse of the 'dobe walls of a ranch house.

Jeff shook his head slowly in approving wonder.

"Smoke," he said, "if this yere ain't a little bit of heaven, then there ain't no sich place!"

HE was about to spur his gelding down the steep side of the valley toward the ranch house when suddenly he froze like a brazen image. His keen blue eyes narrowed and he leaned forward, resting a sunburned hand on the pommel of his Mexican saddle. Something had moved in the clump of cottonwoods below him, a slight furtive movement that only a trained eye would have detected.

Slipping from the saddle in one fluent movement, Jeff took three steps forward, moving as silently as an Indian in his high horseman's boots; then he stopped and looked again. Now he could make out what it was that had moved it. It was a cowpuncher who lay half hidden in the cottonwood's shade, his eyes riveted on the deep pool that lay beneath him.

"Now what the tarnation . . .?" muttered Jeff. He drew closer and his eyes went past the lurking, prone figure to the pool, and he gasped.

There, swimming in the clear coolness of the water like some mythical sea beauty, was one of the prettiest girls that Jeff had ever seen . . . and she was naked as the day she was born! The semi-transparent water caressed long slim limbs and a shapely back making them seem too pink and lovely to be true. She swam easily, gracefully for a moment, then rolled over and floated on her back, her face to the sun. Jeff sucked in his breath with admiration.

Her white rounded breasts, reminding him of the Sierras at dawn, broke out of the water as she extended her arms at her sides to balance herself. There was a dry taste in Jeff's mouth that had nothing to do with the dust he had been breathing in all morning. But he remembered himself and averted his eyes and flushed.

After all, if a pretty girl chose to swim in Eve's bathing suit he had no right to. . . . Then an angry look came into his blue eyes. He had stopped looking as soon as he had realized he was intruding on a woman's privacy but that coyote of a Peeping Tom down there was staring his eyes out and licking his chops for more.

There! The sneaking varmint was on his knees now, edging forward to get a better look!

QUICKLY Jeff stepped back to his horse and lifted his coiled rawhide lariat from his saddle. He shook the loop once; then with a smooth underhand movement he sent it sailing through the air in a Spanish overhang cast. The hondo glittered in the sun for a moment as the loop spun out, before it dropped squarely over the shoulders of the crouching man below. He leaped to his feet with a startled yell and as he did so, Jeff yanked the noose tight, pinioning his arms to his side. Whistling to Smoke to stand steady, Jeff went down the rope toward the man hand over hand, to keep a strain on it.

He could hear sudden excited splashes from the pool as the girl, realizing that she was no longer alone, swam for the bank where her clothes were piled, but he did not look in her direction. His eyes were fixed on the rage contorted face of the big man who was struggling futilely to free his arms from the tight rawhide of the noose. His ten gallon hat had fallen from his head, exposing a low forehead topped by a tangled mass of

red hair. His big shoulders were covered by a checked shirt, and a leather vest flapped as he strained his deep chest to release himself.

"You bowlegged rannie!" he yelled at Jeff. "Unhitch me or I'll break you in two!"

Jeff sat on a rack near him, keeping a strain on the rope with one hand and starting to roll a cigarette with the other.

"Jes' take it easy, pardner," he drawled. "Since you was takin' such a good look at the lady there, I figger she might want to take a squint at you."

"Why, you mangy, flea-bitten son . . !" shouted the big man, then checked himself, looking past Jeff's shoulder. Jeff turned and saw that the girl stood beside him, her blue eyes blazing. She was wearing blue denim overalls tucked into high boots and, since she had thrown on her clothes without drying herself, her white blouse clung wetly to the round swell of her breasts like another skin.

"RED ROSSON!" she cried, her eyes fixed on the big man, "Peeping at me, eh?" She took an angry step forward, "By God, if dad were here . . ."

"My name's Jeff Corbin, ma'am," said Jeff. "And anything your dad would do to this side winder I'd be glad to do myself." He got to his feet and stepped forward.

"Listen, Joan," said Red Rosson, "I was jes' passin' by and . . ."

"Passin' by?" snorted Jeff. "You was hiding in the cottonwoods and starin' yer eyes out."

"Well, what of it?" spat Rosson. "I wanted to marry you legal, Joan. Asked ya five or six times but you allus said 'No.' So when I got a chance to see ya and find out what made you so stuck up, I took it." His big mouth curved in an ugly smile. "And I saw plenty! Try and play goody-goody with me again, ya little witch an' . . ."

The word was hardly out of his mouth when with his left hand Jeff flipped the noose off Rosson's arms, freeing them. Then before the big man knew what was happening. Jeff stepped in and swung a terrific right hook into his mouth. The blow sent Rosson sprawling backward onto the grass. He lay there half stunned for a moment, before, with a scream of rage, he leaped to his feet, his hands diving down for the six guns that swung at his hips.

"Keep yore hands idle, Rosson," snapped Jeff, a .45 in each hand as he spoke. "Or since you're reaching for them, you might take them out and throw them this way."

A moment Rosson hesitated, glaring, speechless with fury, then he took out his guns and tossed them at Jeff's feet. Jeff picked them up, broke them, and flipped out the shells. He looked at Rosson steadily.

"The next time I see you, Rosson," he said slowly, "I got an idea I'm gonna have to plug you. And since I don't want no one to say you was slow on the draw because you was usin' strange guns, I'm givin' these back to you." He threw them to the big man. "Now vamos, pronto, and don't stop to try and re-load."

Rosson glowered back at him with blasting hate in his eyes. Then without a word he turned on his heel and started up the valley. Jeff watched him for a moment and was just starting to holster his guns when he saw the big man jerk his head slightly. Catlike, hardly knowing why he did it, Jeff leaped to one side. From somewhere up the valley a rifle cracked and a bullet whined past his shoulder plumb where his head had been a minute before. With lightning speed

his thumbs hooked his six gun hammers and both guns roared at once, whipping lead back at the rifle flash. There was a yell of pain and a swarthy Mexican leaped to his feet from behind a clump of bushes where he had been hiding and started hot-footing it up the valley, clutching his wounded shoulder. Rosson was running also, close at his heels.

"Try to dry gulch me, eh?" snarled Jeff and his guns came up again; then he looked at the wide eyed girl and a swift grin lit up his face. "Wal, I'll let 'em go till next time, like I said," he went on and slipped the guns back into their holsters. "I got an idea that corpses like theirs would poison the grass around here 'stead of fertilizin' it, anyway."

The girl smiled back at him and put a hand on his arm.

"I'm glad you didn't shoot," she said softly. "And thanks for stopping Rosson from peeping at me. I won't say more than that now, but how about coming up to the ranch for some chow?"

"Ma'am," said Jeff, bowing gravely, "even if I wasn't wanting more of your company like I never wanted anything before, that'd be an invitation I couldn't refuse." She laughed gaily, as he whistled to Smoke and they started for the ranch house.

THE sun was slanting down behind the hills when Jeff pushed the plate away from him, stretched out his long legs with a sigh and started to roll a cigarette.

"Miss Follette, ma'am," he said, "that was plumb perfect."

"You may call me Joan," she said smiling. "My friends do. Is that all you want?"

Jeff's eyes studied her lovely, impish face, traveled on down the young swelling curve of her bosom to the blue denim trousers that moulded themselves to the roundness of her thighs and calves. His temples were starting to throb again with the memory of how he had had first seen her.

"I . . . I couldn't eat another thing, Joan," he said.

She was standing close to him now, so close that he could breath the fragrance of her body and feel its warmth.

"That's not what I asked you," she said softly. "You see, I hated Red Rosson from the very first minute I saw him. I always knew I'd fall in love the same way."

"Joan!" A moment Jeff stared at her in ecstatic unbelief. "Listen, I'm only a poor puncher who's been battin, around the country since I was old enough to straddle a hoss. I've seen plenty of girls in my time but never . . ." then somehow he knew that further words were unnecessary and he had pulled her down on to his lap and was burying his face in her soft hair. "You like me! God!"

He pressed his mouth to hers and felt her lips part under its pressure. Her arms were around his neck as she held herself against him, her breasts crushed on his chest with unbearable softness, for all their resiliency seeming to stab him to the heart. He kissed her again and again, the hollow of her neck, her shoulders, her mouth. His blood was roaring in his veins, his ears singing as he heard her quickened breathing. Then, as her eyes rolled up and closed, he rose to his feet still holding her, cradling her possessively in his arms. . . .

JOAN stirred sleepily in Jeff's arms and looked out the window at the low gleaming stars that winked above them.

"Big Tim should be home soon," she whispered. "Then we can tell him about us."

At the window, Rosson still held her in front of him.

"Your father?" asked Jeff. She nodded. "When I first saw this here valley," Jeff went on, "I said it looked like a bit of heaven, but I shore never thought I'd find it complete with angels." He swept a long burning kiss down her bared shoulder and arm.

"Darling!" whispered Joan, but he could see that she frowned in the darkness. "It could turn out to be a hell instead of a heaven if dad doesn't get a good price for his cattle."

"How's that, honey?" asked Jeff.

"Well, we've been having a hard time here lately," explained Joan. "Been losing cattle right and left. Rustlers, I guess. And we've been having difficulty with the cow hands too. Some just quit and won't say why, and some. . . . Well, last month we found fifty head of prime yearlings gone and two of our punchers shot dead where the cattle should have been grazing."

"Hmmmm." Jeff frowned reflectively.

"And that's not the worst of it," Joan went on, "Red Rosson's been after dad to sell the place to him for a long time. This is getting to be a dry range and he needs the water for his cattle. He's the biggest rancher around here, you know. Well, dad wouldn't sell but finally we needed the money so badly he gave Rosson a mortgage on the place. The money's due tomorrow and that's why dad went to town to sell some cattle, even though the price is way down now. If he doesn't get the money to Rosson, he'll have to let him take over Hidden Valley."

"What time did your dad say he'd be back?" asked Jeff.

"Oh, along about eight."

"Eight!" exclaimed Jeff. "It's after eleven now!"

"Well, he had the boys with him to drive the stock," said Joan. "They probably got to drinkin' and were delayed."

Jeff was on his feet now and again his eyes were alert, wary.

"Mebbe so," he said. "But if you was my gal, I wouldn't leave you here alone longer'n I had to. I'd let my punchers find their way back by themselves."

Joan looked frightened.

"Where are you going?" she asked. "You don't think anything could have happened to dad?"

"I dunno," said Jeff. "But I'm shore gonna find out."

He strapped on his two .45's, then knelt and kissed her.

"So long, honey," he said. "I'll be back soon as I kin." Checking an impulse to crush her lovely body in his arms just once more, he was out of the house and whistling up his horse.

FAR away and slightly below him, Jeff could make out the blinking lights of the town. He estimated the distance with his eye.

"'Bout four or five miles," he said to himself. "All right, Smoke, let's go." He prodded the big gelding on. The horse was just breaking into a lope when suddenly he reared and swung sideways. Jeff steadied him with a sure hand.

"Now what in thunder . . .?" Then, his eyes catching sight of the dark object on the ground at which the horse had shied, he was out of the saddle and kneeling. A man of about fifty lay there, blood on his face, yet even through the red smears there was something vaguely familiar about him.

"Good God!" gasped Jeff. "Big Tim! Joan's dad! It must be! He looks exactly like her!"

He started to bend his head to the man's chest to listen for a possible heartbeat but at that moment Follette opened his eyes and looked dazedly about him.

"What . . . what happened?" he asked weakly.

"You got your head creased," said Jeff, studying at the scalp wound. "Must have stunned you. An inch lower and you wouldn't never have a headache again like the one you probably got now."

"Wait. I remember!" said the wounded man. "The money!" He fumbled at his waist for a belt that wasn't there. "Gone!" he groaned.

"You're Big Tim Follette, aren't you?" asked Jeff. The wounded man nodded despairingly, and he went on. "I come out lookin' for you. Did you get a look at who plugged you?"

Big Tim shook his head.

"No," he said. "There were about eight of them, all wearing masks. They held me up, took my belt, and then one of them shot me."

Jeff swore savagely under his breath.

"I'll come back here tomorrow and see if I can pick up their trail," he said. "Meanwhile, I think I'd better get you back to your ranch. Where's your cayuse?"

Big Tim looked around him.

"Must have run off," he answered. "He weren't mine anyhow. Mine needed shoeing so I left him in town and borrowed Sheriff Ward's pinto."

"Wal, t'aint so far back to Hidden Valley," observed Jeff. "I guess Smoke can carry double for a spell." He helped Big Tim up behind him and started the horse along the arroyo toward the ranch.

THE stars were just paling toward dawn when Jeff saw the darker blackness of Hidden Valley appear in the notch of the gully's end as if in the buckhorn sight of a 30-30 carbine. Smoke was plodding forward, lead-footed, his head hanging down in utter exhaustion.

"Be there in a shake," said Jeff grimly." Then it'll soon be light enough for me to borrow one of your broncs and backtrail to where you was plugged. I'll pick up them bandits if I have to follow them to. . . ." Suddenly he checked himself, staring down into Hidden Valley.

"Look!" he said and pointed to where the ranch was just becoming visible in the growing light. Big Tim leaned forward following the pointing finger.

A bunch of horses stood hobbled near the ranch and just leaving them, stealing toward the dark house were five men, three others remaining near the horses with rifles in the crooks of their arms.

Jeff slipped off Smoke's back and threw the reins to Big Tim.

"I'm goin' down there," he gritted. "Pronto!"

In a moment Big Tim was at his side and they were running down the valley's slope toward the ranch.

"My head's still buzzin' a bit," gasped the older man, "but that don't bother me nearly so much as the awful itch I got in my trigger finger. Them there men are the ones that plugged me!"

They were in the belt of cottonwoods now and Jeff checked Big Tim's headlong pace. They started to work their way through the cover cautiously. They could hear three heavy blows as one of the men rapped on the door with the barrel of his gun.

"Wake up there, Joan," shouted a voice, "and give us that murderin' rat, Jeff Corbin!"

"Red Rosson!" gasped Big Tim. "It was him that. . . ."

"Shhh!" whispered Jeff. They could see a lamp light up inside the house.

"Who is it?" Joan's frightened voice came faintly to their ears. "What do you want?"

"It's me, Red Rosson," answered the man at the door. "We want Jeff Corbin."

"He's not here," answered Joan. "What do you want him for?"

Jeff's fingers were digging into Big Tim's arm as in a flash of intuition he realized what Rosson's plan was.

"What for?" Rosson bellowed. "For murder and robbery, that's what for! He killed your own father and took his money away from him and we're gonna give him a little necktie party."

Jeff flinched as he heard Joan scream.

"Do you get it?" he whispered to Big Tim. "Rosson wants your ranch. It's been him who's been stealin' your cattle, scarin' and killin' your punchers to make things tough for you so's you'll go broke. You go into town to get money to pay off his mortgage. He holds you up, shoots you and leaves you for dead. He takes the money from you and then when Joan can't pay up, he takes the ranch besides. And then, to make it perfect, he tries to cover up his murder by blaming it on a stranger, me. He knows that if he can get me lynched for killing you, then no one's gonna investigate the matter further."

"And I thought I'd stomped out most of the rattlesnakes around these parts," growled Big Tim.

"Well, how about finishin' the job now?" asked Jeff as he started to rise to his feet.

"Wait!" said Big Tim. "They're eight to two. We'll take 'em, but let's inch in on them and pick our time." He nodded toward the three men who stood near the horses, their eyes searching the hill slope as if expecting someone to appear from the head of the arroyo, their rifles ready in their hands. "Them rannies would pick us off like rabbits if we came out a'shootin' now."

"I DON'T believe it!" Joan was saying over and over again. "I don't believe it!"

"No?" snarled Rosson. "Well, you'll believe it when you see him doin' a jig four feet from the ground! Come on, boys. Break in the door."

In a swift rush, the men dashed forward and hurled themselves at the door. There was a crash as it burst open and then they were inside. Jeff was trembling with rage, swearing steadily under his breath, yet with Big Tim's restraining hand on his arm, he held himself back until the time was ripe for him to cut loose with his six guns.

They could hear doors slamming as Rosson and his rannies searched the house, looking in closets, under beds, everywhere.

"Where is he?" As he spoke, they could see Rosson through the window and with one accord both Jeff's and Big Tim's guns came up and leveled on him. But before either could fire, he had swung Joan around in front of him so that she was between him and the window.

"Where is he?" repeated Rosson.

"I won't tell you!" answered Joan defiantly. "I know he didn't do it!"

"You won't talk, eh?" sneered Rosson. "Miguel!" he called and a swarthy Mexican with one arm in a sling stepped forward. Jeff recognized him at once as the man he had winged the morning before.

"Hold her!" commanded Rosson and with an evil grin the Mexican stepped forward and grabbed Joan's shoulder. Like a wild cat she turned on him, scratching and tearing until he staggered backwards.

"Help him, Lefty!" roared Rosson, and a burly cowpuncher leaped forward and helped Miguel hold her.

The word was hardly out of his mouth when Rosson sprawled backward from Jeff's fist.

"I got a purty good squint at how you look without all those duds," said Rosson, a bestial look on his red face, "but I think it's about time I had another . . . at closer range. Are ya gonna tell me where Corbin's hid?"

"No!" answered Joan. "You wouldn't dare . . . !"

JEFF was struggling like a madman in Big Tim's grasp, but Joan's father, his face white with strain, was holding him firmly to keep him from dashing down the slope to certain death at the rifles of the men who guarded the horses.

"Wouldn't I, though?" said Rosson. One of his hamlike hands shot out and fastened in the neck of her kimono. He looked gloatingly into her face. She screamed, as he tore the garment from her, leaving her clad only in a sheer nightdress that showed the lovely curves of her young body through its clinging fabric.

Rosson licked his lips.

"Gonna talk?" he asked again, his voice thick with the barely repressed emotions that the sight of her almost nude body awoke in him.

"No!" said Joan again, her voice sharp with the anguish of shame. "No! No!"

"Good!" said Rosson and again his hand started to go out.

"LET me go!" Jeff demanded of Big Tim. "Let me go! By God, I'll get that son . . . !"

Big Tim's voice was harsh with controlled murderous rage.

"Good God, Jeff," he said, "don't forget she's my daughter! Do you think I . . . ?" He gritted his teeth, leaving the sentence unfinished. "But if you bust out of here, you'll just get plugged and then where will she be? Wait for a break!" he implored.

They both stared through the distant window again. Rosson's hand was fastened on the thin cloth of Joan's nightdress now. Swiftly she bent and sank her teeth into his big hand. With a wild yell, Rosson snatched it away, still clutching the neck of the nightgown. There was a ripping sound, the gown slithered from her shoulders, and Joan moaned, half her dainty beauty exposed to the avid eyes of the five men. Vainly she tried to cover her nakedness with her hands.

"You hell cat!" snarled Rosson shaking his bitten fingers. "By God, I'll get you for that!" Leaping forward, he seized her in his arms in a bear-like hug.

Jeff could stand no more. With a wild yell of hate he threw off Big Tim's powerful grasp as if it were the clasp of a child and started pelting down the slope toward the house. He heard the crack of a rifle as one of the men near the horses saw his figure break out of the cover. He heard the whine of the bullet as it whizzed close to his head but his eyes remained fixed on the window where Rosson still held Joan between himself and Jeff's line of fire, only now he was holding her deliberately there as a shield. The burly cowboy, Lefty, moved sideways, bending low at the sound of the rifle's crack and now Jeff's gun barked and the rannie threw up his hands and pitched forward on what had once been his face. Rosson was down on the floor, crouched below the window and one of the other men in the house had knocked out the lamp.

There was a pile of rocks to Jeff's right and with guns booming at him from the house and from where the three men stood by the hobbled horses, with lead whistling all around him, he leaped behind the rocks and squatted down. A moment later Big Tim joined him there.

IT WAS growing lighter by the minute now. The first rays of the rising sun glinted on the gun barrel of one of the men near the fidgeting horses and Jeff snapped a shot at him. A yell

of pain told him that he had found his mark.

"We'll get 'em!" gritted Jeff. "Every one of 'em!"

"Sho', son!" drawled Big Tim. "Or they'll get us. Sort of like grabbin' a bear by the tail, ain't it? Yuh got him, but yuh dasn't let go. They got us covered from two angles here."

It was only then that Jeff realized the predicament they were in. They were huddled behind the pile of rocks exposed to fire from two sides. The sun would go up higher and higher and they would have no shade, no water, no food, while the men in the house could take their time and pick them off. Jeff snapped another shot at a movement inside the house and cursed.

"Rosson!" he yelled. "Kin ya hear me? I wanta talk to you."

"I'll talk to you with lead, you long legged son!" roared back Rosson.

"That's just what I want!" answered Jeff. "This here is our fracas. Will you call off your boys and shoot it out with me like a man or are you the murderin' yellow dog I think you are?"

"Yah!" jeered Rosson. "Come out and have you plug me? Not a chance!"

"Don't do it, Jeff," Joan called pleadingly. "Don't do it!"

Jeff gritted his teeth.

"Yuh got my word the fight'll be on the square, Rosson," he said. "And I ain't found it necessary to lie yet. The man with the fastest draw wins."

"No!" screamed Joan again. "They're going to. . . ." then her voice choked off as if a hand had been clapped over her mouth.

"All right, Corbin," said Rosson. "Come on down here in front of the house."

"First let your rannies throw their irons out and line up where I can see them," said Jeff. "I don't aim to let two men take shots at me at once."

He could hear a faint whispering going on inside the house, then at Rosson's command the three men beside the horses threw down their rifles and walked over to the clear spot in front of the ranch house where they dropped their six shooters. The men inside the house filed out, Rosson behind them, and put down their guns too. Jeff rose to his feet.

"Don't, Jeff," said Big Tim. "Rosson's quick as a strikin' sidewinder and besides I don't trust him as far as I can throw a maverick by the tail."

"Wal, I ain't no snail myself," drawled Jeff. "Nor too trustin' neither. I'll keep my eyes peeled." With Big Tim at his side he walked down the slope to the clearing in front of the ranch house.

Joan was standing in the doorway, her torn kimono wrapped around her.

Her eyes widened when she saw Big Tim.

"Father!" she gasped. "Then you weren't . . . ? Oh, thank God!"

MIGUEL, standing beside her in the doorway, his arm in a sling, turned a dirty yellow when he saw what he thought was a dead man, but he said nothing. Rosson looked at Big Tim coolly.

"So I didn't get you after all, eh, Follette?" he said. "Well, there'll be time enough to try again . . . soon!"

He stood there with his legs widespread, his hands hanging loosely at his side. Even as he talked to Big Tim his bloodshot eyes were fixed not on him but on Jeff, glaring murderously at him with all the fires of hell burning in his cunning brain.

(Continued on page 111)

TRIGGERS

By
STEWART
GATES

For a man with trigger fingers like he had, Spruce was mighty slow to throw down on the stage bandits, and again on a helpless girl's tormentor. Nobody knew just what he was waiting for, until Spruce himself decided to let them know—with a bang!

FOR the second time that day the tall, lanky stranger who'd come into Old Man Hacket's General Store and Post Office, didn't shoot when he had good call to use both the irons that were holstered at his sides. Yet, looking at him, up and down, a hombre would think he could shoot both sudden like and on a straight line.

Looseknit, he was, which would mean that he ought to be quicker than hell-fire. He wore fine shop-made boots, a blue shirt, and black neckerchief. Spruce

ON THE TRAIL

"Put your iron up, pardner," said Spruce. "I ain't got a call to jump into anybody's corral over strange females."

like, and that's what he named himself when Old Man Hacket asked him. Spruce Craig, he branded himself.

This second time that he left his guns in their leather when he should have had them out, was when Anse Miller, foreman of the Box-B spread, swaggered into Pop Hacket's and laid his beefy paws on a girl who was swinging her legs off a cracker barrel and talking to Pop.

This stranger, Spruce Craig, had been looking at the girl approving like, which nobody could have held against him. She was a curvy-shaped, red-blooded little filly if ever there was one, this Spruce Craig was thinking.

She was wearing a mighty thin dress that was pulled tight by the way she was sitting, sort of leaning back with her hands propped behind her on the barrel top. The twin mounds of her young breasts were like the two halves of a prize apple, the way her dress shaped them when they pushed out against the thin material. The stranger could tell, by the way they quivered when she moved that she wore nothing over them to confine them. Above them her mouth was a twin-petaled passion flower, so

red and mutinous it was, and her eyes were sultry mystery.

MAYBE she hadn't been caring much about what Pop Hacket saw, he being old like he was, and the pair of them being alone in the store, until Spruce Craig ambled in for some tobacco. Her petticoat had slipped up over her knee caps, maybe because she swung her legs so much, and they were slender and tapering from the knees down. From where Spruce Craig stood he could just glimpse the white roundness of bare thighs under her skirt hem. Her skin was fine grained, like the best china, and sort of like polished ivory, only soft-looking. While the stranger stared, he tingled down his spine and his blood ran hot.

The girl knew all at once, judging from the way she flushed, that she was showing more of her legs than was rightful, specially to a stranger. She squirmed a little but decided not to let on that she knew—and pulling down her skirts would tell anybody that she knew what he was seeing. So she just kept her knees tight together and kept on swinging her pretty legs.

When Anse Miller came in, Spruce Craig was looking in the girl's eyes, forgetting her knee caps for a minute. He saw fright come into them, sudden fearful terror. It was what comes into a young hiefer's eyes when a cowboy bulldogs it.

ANSE MILLER was a big maverick, about as big as they make 'em and let 'em still be able to ride a mustang. His puffy face was scarred by somebody's knife, most like some woman's knife, because Anse figured women out to be same as cows except such times as he was notioned to make 'em amusing to him.

He raged down on the frightened girl, bellowing and calling her a name that belongs among cattle on the range. It was no name at all for a woman and Spruce Craig knew this girl wasn't of that brand at all.

Old Man Hacket got up and tried to protect the girl, but he was a frail old fellow and all he could do was cackle.

"Now look here, Anse Miller! You been likkerin' up. You keep your hands off Millie!"

Anse flung the old man aside and grabbed for the girl, who'd slid down from the barrel. Her legs were covered now. They were covered but her thin dress was tight over them too, like over her breasts and her little rounded waist, and the stranger could trace the downward sweep of thighs clear from her long-lined hips.

Anse Miller said thickly, "I thought I'd find you here, damn you! You come with me. I'm ridin' you to the ranch where you'll git what's comin' to you. I ain't like your uncle, Cord Mason."

Now, maybe the stranger, this Spruce Craig, didn't have his call to draw just yet. He didn't know how close the girl belonged to the big lobo, and it's not becoming a man to mix in too stampeded-like between a man and his own women. But next minute he did have a call.

The girl screamed. "I won't go to the ranch. I'm staying with Pop Hacket till my uncle comes home. He wasn't on the stage today."

Spruce Craig didn't seem to be watching the scared girl anymore. He just watched Anse Miller, particularly the big coyote's beefy hands. Anse struck the man aside so brutally that he fell onto the floor in a rheumatic heap. Then, with one of his huge paws, he slapped the girl in the face so hard that she fell

over the old man's body, sprawling. While she was scrambling, her petticoats flew into the air and the stranger caught a flash of creamy white legs way up to where a little frill of white lace marked the beginning of scanty panty bloomers.

ANSE was not satisfied with what he'd done. There was a snarl on his face like he'd gone loco. He reached down and jerked the girl to her feet. The whole shoulder of her dress and a patch of the white undergarment she was wearing came away in his hand. One side of rosy tinted body down almost to the arch of her hips was left bare. One little rounded curve of breast peeped out, soft and tempting. The girl threw her hand up to hide it from Anse Miller and the stranger.

Spruce Craig should have drawn then. He had a call right there. Anse Miller was handling the trembling girl too rough for any woman to be handled. The stranger should anyway have smashed a fist into the big maverick's flabby face. It was plain to be seen she wasn't the kind that was used to having her uncovered body stared at, which meant of course she wasn't a dance hall package.

But Craig just kept on staring at Anse's hands, like they fascinated him. The girl tried to back away and cried out, "Help me, mister! They'll kill me if he takes me home."

Anse Miller wheeled. His fingers prowled for his own shooting iron. Seemed like the lanky younger man could have beaten the lumbersome Anse to that draw if he's wanted to or wasn't scared.

He only said, worried like, "Put your iron up, pardner. I ain't got a call to jump into anybody's corral over strange females."

Anse sneered at him, looking him up and down, and put his gun away. "You're using horse sense, Mister Stranger," he snarled. "I'm ridin' herd on this wench, an' they ain't no jasper ridin' in with objections."

Maybe Spruce Craig's lids flickered, but he kept his mouth shut. Anse clawed for the girl with both hands, now, and when she struggled, he called her that wrong name again. His fingers got tangled in what was left of her dress and there was a ripping and tearing, with a shriek from the girl, and she stood there, cowering against the wall, in nothing at all but the flimsy white garment around her hips, and her shoes and black stockings.

Spruce Craig sucked in a breath between his teeth, while he stood there not helping the girl out. She was polished ivory all over, with rose tints in the hollow of the bosom she tried so hard to hide. Her white legs seemed to ripple down into the tight sheath of her stockings. She clutched wildly for the remnants of her dress and slip, but Anse Miller's claws trapped her. His thick fingers dug into her soft snowy flesh.

He lifted her and, with an oath, reached into a pile of blankets on Pop Hacket's counter and threw one of these around the almost naked figure so that it was partly covered at least. Then he carried her into the street, her bare legs kicking futilely. While they passed Spruce Craig, her accusing eyes flashed him a look of mighty scorn.

IN THE street, Anse flung her across his saddle and climbed up heavily beside her. Mercifully it was getting dark and not so many of the street loungers could treat their eyes to the long bare legs kicking out from one side of Anse's gelding.

Pop Hacket bit deep into a tobacco plug while he looked at the stranger disgustedly. "Mebby," he said, "you was actin' like a wise coyote after all. There's a bunch of Anse's men in town right now, and they're snake pizen when they's chukkered up with red eye."

Spruce Craig looked mighty ashamed of himself. Especially when the old man squinted at his fingers and grumbled, "Them looks to me like trigger fingers, too, mister. My own fingers is too shaky to handle a trigger even if I kept one in the store, but they's itchin' some jest the same when Anse was rippin' off Millie Mason's clothes thataway."

Now there wasn't any doubt that Spruce Craig's lids flickered. "You say her name's Millie Mason?"

"I said that, stranger. Do it make any meanin' to you?"

"No, just thought it kind of pretty. Maybe you'd tell me something about the big jasper who was throwin' down on her so dirty like, and what's she 'fraid of? Understand, I'm just curious, me bein' in here watchin'."

The old man considered for a full minute while he chewed his cud. Didn't know whether he wanted to hold gab with a two gun man who'd stand there and see Millie Mason made such a show of or not. But gabbing was one of Pop Hacket's failings.

"Her uncle, the Cord Mason she named, owns the Box-B. Leastawise, he always has owned it, him and Millie's dad before her dad died. But lately Anse Miller, who's the Box-B foreman, has been spreadin' 'round that he just the same as owns the spread, cause of money out of a take he'd saved up which he loaned to Cord and Cord couldn't pay back. Anse has been sayin' that lessen Cord pays him back right away now, he'll take the ranch over.

"Cord's gone to Carson City where he thought a feller he knowed who'd struck a silver mine would lend him the money to pay Anse off and maybe enough for some new cattle. Millie expected Cord on the stage that got in today after bein' held up in Fry's Gulch this mornin'. She was mighty disappointed when he wasn't on the stage, but maybe it was mighty lucky for Cord. He might have had the money with him and them blackleg robbers would a' got it sure."

SPRUCE CRAIG edged down the counter and bought some more pipe tobacco. The old man watched his limber walk and shook his head, frowning at those long, slender "trigger fingers," and the two guns that might have got Millie Mason off.

Spruce asked, abruptly, casual like, "Seems like Millie Mason is plumb scared of the foreman. Him bein' her uncle's hired man, it don't seem reasonable."

The old man spat fiercely.

"Anse runs the ranch to suit hisself and he's put his friends under him, same lobo brand as his own. They run the town, too. I figger he don't like Millie because she, bein' heiress to both her father and uncle, might stand in Anse's way of his gettin' clear title to the Box-B. Leastawise thet's the seemin' to it. An' mebbe it's like Millie says, that he's been a workin' on her powerful bothersome to be more to him than she wants to be or rightful could, bein' the kind of a gal she is."

Pop Hacket stopped to send a new stream of tobacco juice toward the stove box, half way across the store. Then he decided to change the subject. Too much talk about Anse Miller's affairs was bad medicine.

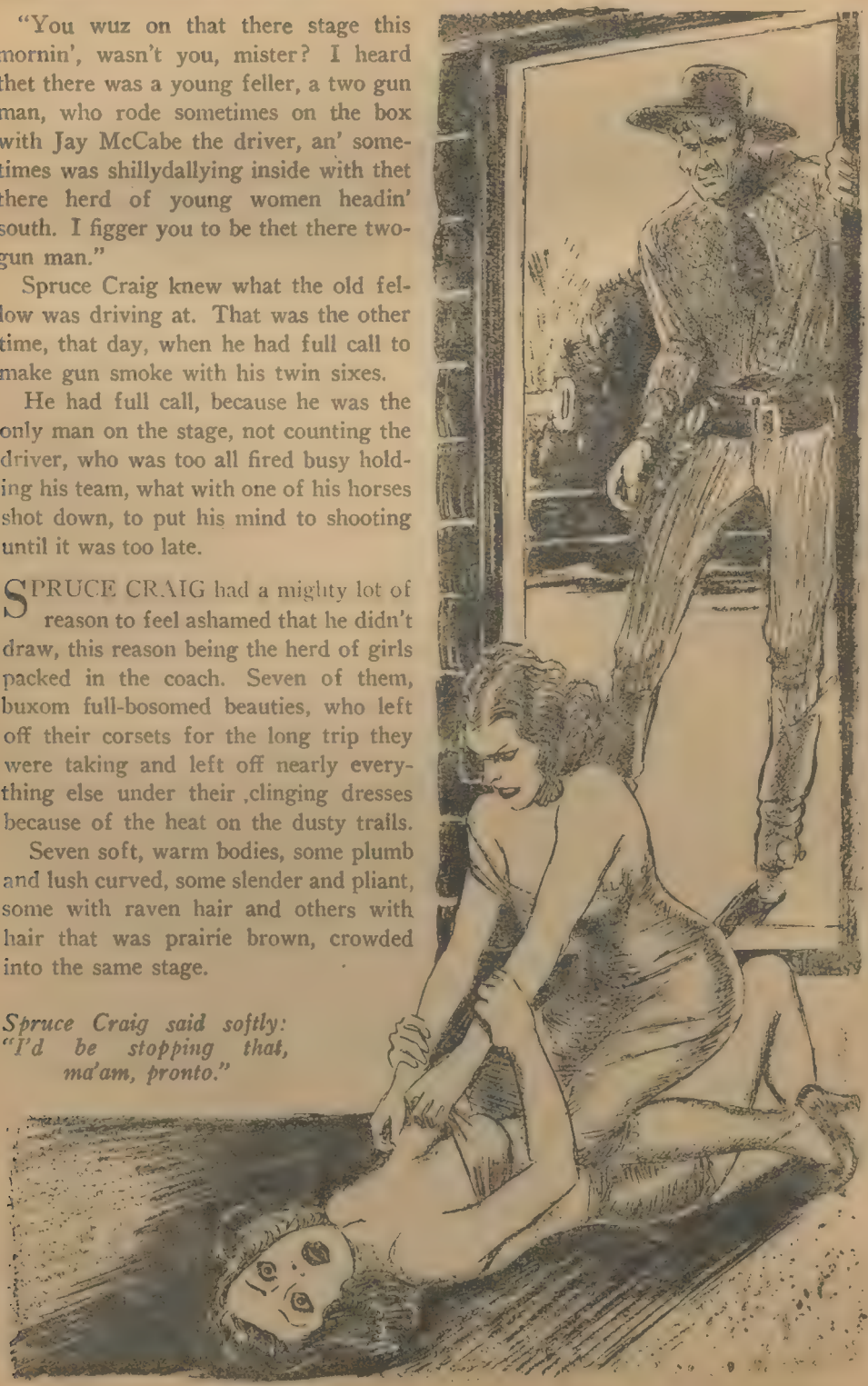
"You wuz on that there stage this mornin', wasn't you, mister? I heard thet there was a young feller, a two gun man, who rode sometimes on the box with Jay McCabe the driver, an' sometimes was shillydallying inside with thet there herd of young women headin' south. I figger you to be thet there two-gun man."

Spruce Craig knew what the old fellow was driving at. That was the other time, that day, when he had full call to make gun smoke with his twin sixes.

He had full call, because he was the only man on the stage, not counting the driver, who was too all fired busy holding his team, what with one of his horses shot down, to put his mind to shooting until it was too late.

SPRUCE CRAIG had a mighty lot of reason to feel ashamed that he didn't draw, this reason being the herd of girls packed in the coach. Seven of them, buxom full-bosomed beauties, who left off their corsets for the long trip they were taking and left off nearly everything else under their clinging dresses because of the heat on the dusty trails.

Seven soft, warm bodies, some plumb and lush curved, some slender and pliant, some with raven hair and others with hair that was prairie brown, crowded into the same stage.



Spruce Craig said softly: "I'd be stopping that, ma'am, pronto."

The seven were on their way to a colony far south from the Mexican border, where the young men settlers so far outnumbered the women that they had sent back home for extra girls who weren't disinclined to getting steady husbands. Most of the seven girls hoped, they had explained to Spruce Craig, that they would find husbands who had already staked their claims and were homesteading in earnest. Some said they didn't care, just so their husbands were good looking. They all thought they could make themselves into good wives.

THEY'D made Spruce's long trip from Carson City mighty pleasing. He was the only young man traveling. It wasn't long before he was trying to hold seven girls in his arms at once, and, finding that hopeless, he soon discovered that he didn't even need to hide from one than on the last relay stop it had been another melting form that had been crushed almost out of shape against his chest. Or that he had mashed his lips against the delicious throat hollow of another. Being healthy young girls who expected soon to be all tied up to one man, they weren't going to pass up their last hours of freedom.

Spruce had had seven different sets of whispers slipped into his ears and had much to look forward to at every relay.

While he rode on the box outside for air, he could run his mind back over his little discoveries, when petticoats slipped up to reveal a glimpse of mysterious thigh, that one pair was milky white and overflowed its primly tight garters, while another pair was tinted like pink roses.

He could remember that the dale in one pair of outthrust breast mounds was narrow and shadowed, the valley between another pair was wide and deep and warmly pink.

THEN when the stage turned from the brown trail and twisted like a great serpent through the chaparral-covered walls of Fry's Gulch, a gun blasted suddenly from the brush and the left mare of the lead team went down on its knees with a scream and rolled over, bringing the other three horses into a pile-up.

Four masked figures stepped out of the brush, two on either side, guns blazing a warning. There was one instant when Spruce Craig's two hands flashed to his holsters. They poised there an instant while he counted the masked road agents whose irons were leveling off. His searching eye caught the glint of a buffalo rifle's nose sticking out of the chaparral off to one side. The bandit who held the rifle pointed at the box, he couldn't see. The blackleg was keeping himself well hidden, all but a hand gripped around the trigger guard.

Bruce took his hands away from his holsters and raised them. He got down to the ground meekly and allowed his sixes to be tossed into the brush.

One robber flung open the stage door and stuck in his head, thrusting in his iron ahead. He came away with an oath.

"Hell! The damned jasper ain't there. All what's in there wears skirts."

The curse went the rounds of the masked quartette. From the robber hidden in the chaparral came a gruff command. "Bring 'em out. Stand 'em all up. Maybe he's tryin' a trick."

One by one the frightened girls were pulled from the coach. Rough hands jerked them into a line. The bandit who looked into each face, one after another, cursed into each one. Then the quartette

turned to the business of collecting money and valuables.

From Spruce Craig's money poke a handful of gold coins was taken. From the stage money box, a bag of silver. When a girl screamed and Spruce saw that grimy hands were pawing through her dress, looking for hidden bags of money or jewelry, he moved slightly. Instandly a bandit poked a gun into his ribs and snapped at him.

The girls' finger yielded few rings. Hidden somewhere about each one was a little money bag. The lobo located them all.

When one refused to lift her petticoats, before every body, so she could get at her money bag, fastened to a string high up her leg next her skin, the bandit slapped her and started to do the job himself.

Now Craig swayed ever so slightly, and bent a little, like a lithe panther about to leap. The motion was so slight the gunman behind him didn't catch onto it. But looking into his eyes, gone to steel, anyone would have known he might be afraid to draw his sixes, but he was seeing that low down skunk probing around the girl's bare skin.

But the girl cried out that she'd bring out her bag, and the robber stepped back. Spruce had a glimpse of plump tapered legs, round columns of creamy skin disappearing under the circlets of impudent little bloomers, then the bag came out and the girl dropped her skirts.

THE blacklegs faded into the brush abruptly. While the driver and Spruce hunted their guns in the chaparral, the girls huddled and wept. When Spruce went up to them, the sobbing stopped and seven pairs of indignant eyes flashed scorn at him. Seven sets of lips he knew the moist flavor of curved disdainfully.

Even the driver had no word for Spruce while he drove the stage behind the three remaining horses toward town and the relay stable behind Old Man Hacket's store. The girls were put up over night to wait for daylight when the stage would go on. They passed Spruce in the street but showed they didn't think it enough for a man to be handy with his arms when a girl was willing. He should be handy with his shooting irons too, when the girl needed them.

Curious like, it seemed, but Spruce had enough gold about him, after he'd had his money poke emptied, to pay a thousand dollars for a Texas stallion at the livery stable. He used the stallion to carry him out the trail right after sun-up to the Box-B. When he got the trail directions from Pop Hacket, he explained that Millie Mason was such a pretty filly, that he kind of felt he ought to go out and see if he couldn't coax Anse Miller to let up on her. Pop Hacket looked at him queerly.

"If Cord Mason was at the Box-B maybe you'd be made welcome, mister, but folks seem to get sudden sick when they tell Anse what he don't like hearin'. Me, iffen I was you, I'd nose the other way, you bein' shy of them pretties in your own holsters, like you are."

But the stallion carried its easy forking rider out the Box-B trail. When he came in sight of the home buildings, which were shabby and dilapidated, he nosed the stallion into a thicket and tied him. He went onto a high rise then, a hundred yards off the trail, and, blocking himself out against a fringe of brush, studied the home spread through a frown.

Maybe the frown was because there didn't seem to be anybody about the yards. Only a fat greaser, whose apron

branded him as the cook. There were no ponies in the corrals and the lone house cow needed a lot of feed.

THERE was some kind of disappointment in Spruce's eyes when he saw the deserted yards, and the look of the bunk house told him that it was empty. He was turning back to his stallion when he heard a scream. A high pitched, girl's scream. It rode across the wind, faint but sharp. His frown blackened and he stood for a moment irresolute, like he was hating to leave Millie Mason in trouble again.

Maybe he was remembering the rosy look of her half bared body, the enticing curves, the firmness of her pert little apple-like breasts. Anyhow, he came to a sudden decision. Old Man Hacket's eyes would have popped out if they'd seen how Spruce loosened both his guns in their leather while he moved on quick but silent feet toward the main house.

The screams rose again and they were screams for help and pleas for mercy. The greaser wasn't in the yards when Spruce went around to the back, where the shrieks came from. A lean-to door was open and Spruce stepped onto the threshold.

For an instant he was transfixed by what he saw. Stretched on the floor was Milly Mason, and she was worse off for clothes to cover her than when Anse Miller ripped her dress from her at Pop Hacket's. The little white garment she wore around her hips was all that was on her now, and that was torn to revealing shreds.

Her body was a tinted splash on the wooden floor of the lean-to, her bare legs and arms flailing wildly while a woman held her down with a knee pressed into her stomach. The woman's back was turned to the door and Spruce couldn't see her face. What he could see was that she was deliberately and brutally digging her finger nails into the helpless girl's soft flesh, raking her rosy body until she was striped with cruelly bleeding scratches.

Through the girl's screams the woman muttered, "When I'm done with you, Anse won't be so hankerin' for you. He won't want to be takin' you away and leavin' me behind. An' you might as well save your yelpin' till I get at the rest of you and your face."

Spruce Craig said, softly, "I'd be stopping that, ma'am, pronto."

THE woman jumped to her feet, a tigress' snarl on her face. She was still a young woman, though the two melon-like mounds that thrust against the transparent kimona she was wearing were beginning to lose their firmness. All she wore under the kimona was a nightgown that was hardly more concealing than a spider's web. The rounds of her breasts were plain to Spruce's sight, under their web-like covering, and her flaring hips were scarcely veiled.

"Who are you?" she snapped, when she had recovered from her surprise at being interrupted scarring the lovely body, still spraddled on the floor, its hands trying to protect the little breasts.

Spruce stared into the fury-lined face a long time. Looked like he was finding that face familiar to him but couldn't quite place it. The woman snappped, "What do you want, sneakin' into a house like that?"

"I wasn't sneaking, ma'am. I came straight when I heard the young lady calling. And seems like she had need to call. That's no way to do to a body, ma'am. I sure can't stand to see any more of it."

"It ain't over-healthy, mister, to ride into other folks' business, not around Anse Miller. You're knowin' who Anse Miller is, ain't you?"

"I'm knowing ma'am. But I was just riding by, on the trail yonder."

After that lie he looked down at the outstretched girl, who was moaning. The girl shivered under his gaze. "If

After tying her, he said to the other girl; "Let's get you some clothes and we'll hit the trail."

you won't help me, go away," she cried. "You wouldn't help me yesterday. Don't stand looking at me, like this."

"You're a sight it's hard to look away from, Miss Millie."

The other woman started. "You know who she is?"

"I heard her name spoken in town."

Suddenly, the woman's face and eyes softened. She seemed to forget the girl for a moment and the girl got to her feet unsteadily and shivered against the wall, dodging behind a window curtain which she held in front of her. The woman slid up to Spruce with a sensuous sway of her hips, her kimona flaring half open, the smooth whiteness of her flesh showing through the gauzy nightgown.

"If you're lookin' for a grub job, mister, maybe I can do somethin'. An' I'll let this little trollop go. I'm Anse Miller's woman, but he says he's takin' her away with him today and leavin' me behind. Maybe you could stay an' run the ranch for me. She paused and moved closer. Her breasts swayed when she walked.

She stood so near, looking up into Spruce's face, that her breast touched his chest an a warm knee brushed his own. She said, "I'd give you a bunk in the house. I think I'd rather have you in the house than Anse."

"I'm fearing, ma'am, what Anse would say to that."

SHE straightened and her eyes flashed. "Would you be afraid of Anse Miller if I favored you for stayin' in the house? Let him take the pink-skinned brat. Let him take her to Mexico like he says, and sell her when he's tired playin' 'round with her. He'll never come near me again—special, if you're ridin' herd on me."

The girl broke in with a cry. "Don't let him take me away. Please, mister. When he comes for me, shoot him. I'll —I'll pay you back."

The woman, whose face Spruce still studied, leaned her lush hips against a table. She turned to snarl at the trembling girl. Spruce was watching the girl, thinking what to say to her, and didn't see the woman's hand flash into the table drawer.

"Stand still, mister!"

He wheeled to look into the muzzle of a six gun held steady. "Don't move for your holsters," the woman warned coldly. "I know you. I knew you when you stepped in the door. Mr. Spruce Craig! Quick gun man from the Navada trails. Trouble-shooter!"

Spruce said, quietly. "I'm knowing you now, too, ma'am. Goldfields Kate. Last wanted for stealing silver pokes from likkered miners in Carson City. The silver vein must have run out too, to find you down here on the Border, scraping your nails over this poor little gal's body."

RIGHT then, Spruce Craig drew for the first time in days. And a lightning draw it was, and all done before Goldfields Kate could follow the flash of his hands. He'd sent his glance, questioning like, to the window and Kate was fooled into following it with the corner of her eyes. When her eyes came back, she was looking into his iron and her own wavered.

"I don't like to draw on a woman, Kate," Spruce said, "but your fingers might itch. And I've got business to attend to."

Fear came into Kate's eyes. "You can't do nothin' to me! I quit stealin' when I left Carson City. I'm Anse Miller's woman, now. He'd kill you."

Spruce grinned. "Seems like he ain't so particular about you any more, wanting younger and more tender ladies. Leastawise, so you said."

He kept her covered and spoke to the girl.

"Now, Miss Millie, tell me about Anse saying he'd take you away."

She'd seen that draw. Her eyes were fixed on the lanky man with new confidence. Her words rushed.

"He's always been after me. Uncle Cord was afraid to stop him. He was looking for Uncle Cord on the stage yesterday, because Uncle Cord was to bring some money to pay off what he owes Anse and get the ranch back. But when he didn't come, Anse got mean and said he'd take me and let the ranch go. He locked up my clothes so I couldn't run off, and he's coming most any time now. I heard them planning last night to meet at Sunlit Canyon. Anse will take me there."

"Maybe," was all Spruce said to the girl. To Goldfields Kate he snapped, "Drop the iron, Kate. I've got to discommode you some."

She dropped the iron and backed away in sudden terror when he walked steadily toward her. Without a word he caught her in a vise-like grip and bore her down to the floor. She struggled and kicked, her legs flashing through rents in her nightgown, her breasts shaking almost free to overflow the gown's hem.

Deliberately Spruce tore her kimono into strips and bound her legs and tied her wrists behind her. Then, while she bit and snarled, he bound her to a chair with a rope he reached from a hook in the wall. She was half nude, sitting there, speechless with rage, but he took no time even to look at her.

To the girl he said, "We'll get your clothes on you, pronto. You're showing me the trail to Sunlit Canyon."

The girl cried, "No, no! It would be suicide. They'll all be there now. They'll kill you."

"Maybe. Let's get the clothes. I'm leaving Kate tied up so she won't be shooting us in the back."

THE girl still protested the danger, but there was a shining look in her eyes while they galloped knee to knee across the range toward the rise of Thunder Ridge where, Millie Mason said, Sunlit Canyon was so hidden that almost you'd forget how to find it each time you left it.

"They were planning something for this morning," she explained while they rode. "I don't know what. That's why they are meeting at Sunlit. Nobody could find them there. But whatever they are doing, Anse won't show himself. He's too big and easily recognized. He lets his men do his dirty work."

When at last the shadow of the Thunder Ridge foothills loomed close, Spruce drew the stallion to a halt. "You say they can't see down here on the flat from where they are meeting," he reminded his companion. "So you tell me the rest of the trail, where to enter the hills, and then you ride off. Ride straight to the sun, and when I'm done, I'll find you. I'll have some news for you then that I haven't told you yet."

"You never could find the Sunlit. I'll ride with you. I'm not afraid—any more."

Spruce looked at her, then quickly looked away. Her breasts were heaving beneath her thin blouse. He mustn't waste time watching those little half-apples rise and fall. Nor study the bit of white thigh that peeped out from under her crawled-up skirts.

(Continued on page 114)

The Waco Kid—Murderer

(Continued from page 39)

The rustler was moving off to one side . . . inching into the shadows. His injured hand slid down toward his gun butt. Pony gave him plenty of rope. He waited until Magee's gun was out, blazed away with both Colts. The rustler slumped, clutching his stomach. Pony wheeled on the Boss.

"Keep your hands clear, mister! Step forward!"

THE masked man hesitated until he heard Rattler Magee's death moans. His legs moved like sticks of wood. Pony jerked him into the lean-to, holstered one of his guns, snatched the white silk kerchief from his face.

"Mary!" he shouted.

Startled, Mary Denton looked up. Her tear-stained face froze in shocked amazement. "Lake!" she gasped.

There was a flash of flame from the darkness beyond the fire. A bullet whized past Pony's ear. He crouched, returned the fire. Lake Gorham took advantage of Pony's split-second inattention. He reached for his gun. Pony saw the move out of the corner of his eye. The Colt he had holstered cleared leather, roared. Lake Gorham died on his feet with lead in his heart.

Pony's troubles weren't over. That one blast from the gang mongrels had given them courage. Guns blazed out of the black. Pony answered them with a withering fire that forced the rustlers to seek shelter behind boulders and sage scrub.

There was a momentary pause in the firing. Pony backed, lifted Mary with one arm, broke through the canvas side of the lean-to. The gelding was at home under gun-fire. Pony swung Mary into the saddle, mounted behind her.

"Down low!" he rasped. His spurs dug deep. "Git!"

The splendid animal shot forward like an arrow out of a bow, hit the trail thundering. Bullets whined like bees. One of them cut through the crown of Pony's sombrero. He laughed as he returned the shot, saw a bearded half-breed fold up and drop.

IT WAS a mad, wild ride into the valley. Once the gelding stumbled, almost threw them. More than once, whizzing pellets of lead came dangerously close. Even Pony breathed a sigh of relief when the gelding pounded up to the Q Bar D ranch-house *portal*. He slid to the ground only to face a circle of guns held by a group of hard-bitten punchers.

"Bring him in!" Carl Denton ordered.

Pony smiled, responded to the prodding six-shooters, stepped into the house. Sheriff Bronson was waiting in the front room.

"I figgered yuh'd drop by, Pony. All cleaned up?"

Pony nodded. "But you'd better get a posse after the gang. They'll come out through the canyon off the river. And you might put the collar on Regan. He was mixed up."

"What about the Big Boss?"

"Lake Gorham. I guess his scheme was to ruin Mr. Denton, here, and grab off the ranch and the girl. He's dead up on the ridge."

The sheriff turned to the amazed punchers, Carl Denton, and Mary. "I

want you to meet my buddy from down-country, Pony Carlson, the Waco Kid. When this rustlin' business had me roped an' tied, I figgered he'd be the hombre tuh clean it up."

Pony flushed. "Don't forget to burn up them circulars, Ike." He swallowed hard. "Wal, guess I'll be ridin'. *Adios.*"

Mary followed him out to the *portal.* "Pony."

He turned. "Yes, ma'am."

"Do—do you have to go?"

He fingered the brim of his sombrero. "I guess so. I'm a ridin' man, not a settin' one."

She came closer, her breasts rising and falling in a rapid rhythm. "But—but you could wait for sun-up, couldn't you?"

Some smart hombre had closed the porch door. Pony swept her into his arms. "I sure could!"

The black gelding whinnied and walked away.

Ace in the Hole

(Continued from page 27)

rode out of One Step. A mile out, he rode up beside her and lifted her from the saddle. He held her on his lap, her arms around his neck, she cradled close to him.

"Frosty," she murmured, "my skirt."

Her wide, divided skirt was slipping upward, disclosing the velvet white flesh of her tapering legs above her stocking tops. There was more than promise in the glimpse Frosty caught when the silk blouse she wore ballooned wide at her throat.

"I swore I'd teach you lessons," he muttered hoarsely.

She snuggled hard against him.

"I'm calling you, Frosty," she whispered. "Show your hand."

Sheep Hater

(Continued from page 65)

shoulder. Stupidly he gazed from the bloodstained bandage to the bars that surrounded him. As if in answer to his unspoken question, old Pop Salters appeared on the other side.

"Why am I here, Pop?" he asked vaguely.

The old man spat. "Murder, ye damned fool! When a man is caught with a smoking gun standing over a dead man, they don't put him in jail for petty larceny." He turned on his heel and walked away.

Buck Magee sank back on his cot, his head in his hands.

Midnight. From somewhere down the corridor the sounds of a scuffle, the dull thud of a falling body. Then a key in the cell door, a door creaking wide.

"Who is it?"

"Come out, you fool, and hurry. Mal Stevens is helping you on account of you're his sister's husband!"

Stevens? But when he got outside the jailhouse he looked at the leering faces of Slade and Jennings, Stevens'

gunmen. "Say," he began, and Slade clouted him over the head with the butt of a gun.

THERE was a throbbing pain in his head, a searing pain in his wounded shoulder. His burning eyes finally made out the dim outlines of a shabbily furnished shack with a candle flickering on the table, stuck in its own melted wax. Buck Magee shook the cobwebs from his eyes, tried to remember what had happened. And the only thing he could think of was Ellen Stoner. Ellen, who thought he had killed her father! The pain of that thought was worse than the pain of his wounds.

He heard the voices coming from the next room, a woman's voice, a voice he recognized all too well. Ellen Stoner's voice, gasping in despair.

"Don't look at me like that! Of course I know you hired my father to drive in the sheep. He told me so himself. Don't, don't touch me! I know you're trying to ruin Buck Magee and I'll help you do it. I hate him, he killed dad!"

A drunken laugh. "Well, darling, he's in the other room. Do you know what's going to happen to him? I'm going in a minute and kill him myself! Oh, I've played it well. They'll think he escaped from jail and skipped the country! And who'll get his ranch? His wife, of course. And I'll have the Double Box and the Circle M. I'll have my sheep range!"

"You wouldn't kill him?" Almost a whisper. Then the whisper ended in a scream. "Don't touch me!" The sound of a struggle, a man's curses.

"You little devil! I'll teach you to bite me!" Ripping cloth, thud of a body, a scream of agony. The man's voice was thick. "Damn you, I've had my eye on you ever since I first saw you. Do you know any reason why I should wait any longer?"

Slowly Buck Magee inched toward the flaming candle, turned his back to it. He saw the thing clearly now, at least a little more clearly. Now his hands were over the flame. It bit into his wrists, seared the skin, filled the room with a sickening stench. But the cords gave way. He staggered toward the other room, a bloody spectacle.

In the doorway he paused, shook the growing mists from his eyes. And Ellen screamed again. She was backed into a corner, clothes literally stripped from her sturdy body. Breasts trembled and danced, the soft flesh of her thighs quivered as she kicked at her tormentor.

"Stevens." Stevens whirled, saw the bloody apparition in the doorway and snarled as he went for his gun.

"Stevens," Buck went on weakly. "tell her you killed her father. Tell her you did it." On wobbly feet he came into the room, his burnt hands crooked like claws. Stevens threw back his head and laughed.

"You poor fool! Of course I killed her father, just as I'll kill you, as I'll kill her when I get through with her! What a fool you are! You, marrying my sister! Sister, hell! Listen, Magee, I'm going to drill you through your sore shoulder first."

ON came Magee, head down doggedly, arms extended. Ellen screamed. The gun went off. Magee was slammed to the floor. Ellen ran toward him. Stevens sideswiped her with the smoking gun and she went down in a heap. He stood over Magee. The gun was raised. But the gun never spoke. The report came from the doorway where

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Lola Stevens stood with smoking pistol.

Stevens made no sound as he hit the floor, clutching his stomach.

"Damn you," grated Lola to Stevens, as she leaned over Magee. "I was getting sort of to like the guy. He's the only man that ever treated me white in my life, no matter how nasty I was to him. If it hadn't been for you and your ideas, things might have—what the hell?" She shrugged shapely shoulders, turned to Ellen.

"Come on quick, before Slade and Jennings come. Help me bandage Buck's shoulder. There's horses outside."

Later three riders paused at the crossroads. To the left lay the town of Smithville. To the right the trail led over the mountains. The man reeling in his saddle was supported by Ellen. Lola pulled rein. "I'm leaving you here," she said. "Goodbye, Buck."

Buck groaned. "Do you know," went on Lola reflectively, "I believe that's the first good turn I ever did anyone, shooting Mal Stevens. Well, I'm hitting trail. You damned babes in the woods get into town and get that shoulder looked after. So long, sis, be good to him. So long, Buck."

Her voice was husky. "And if it does you any good, we were never legally married, Buck. You see I forgot to divorce Mal a long while ago. You'll find the records in Denver. Our marriage was just another of Mal's schemes."

Grey fingers of dawn were lighting the sky. Lola leaned and kissed Buck Magee. Buck and Ellen stared after her as she clattered away. Neither of them knew that she was riding into the dawn with tears in her eyes.

They wheeled their horses, started on the dusty road to town.

Hell's A-Poppin'

(Continued from page 15)

caught eight slugs!" Leaderless, the crowd dispersed.

LATER, arm about the quivering shoulders of Sue Torrey, Milt Cross said, "I don't care if you're a jailbird, or an outlaw, Doe. I don't give a damn what your name is. You got a job ramrodding the Four Square anytime you want it!"

The Widow Larsen, fire in her eyes, said, "He's got a job, Milt. He owes me room and board and has to work it out. Come along, John Doe."

A half block down the street he said nervously, "Be a little careful with that dynamite, won't you, Missus Larsen."

She caught his arm. "My name is Olga," she said sternly. "Anyway that ain't dynamite. It's a bunch of yellow candles I had."

John Doe sighed and followed her meekly. His voice was humble. "And I thought women was only good for one thing."

Rodeo Rats

(Continued from page 77)

took to be his cowardice. "But anyway, let's not part this way, Mr. Ettore. Have a cigar." And releasing himself from Myra he stepped forward, took a cigar from his shirt pocket and put it on Ettore's desk.

Ettore looked up at him with mocking sneer. "I don't want your damned cigar," he said. "You know what you can do with it."

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Both he and Ricco were starting to grin with triumph.

"Aw, come on now, Mr. Ettore," wheedled Rip. "Take it just to show there's no hard feelin's." And he picked up the cigar and stuck it carefully in Ettore's breast pocket; then, just as Ettore winked over his shoulder at Ricco, Rip's hand dived under Ettore's coat and flipped out a small, wicked-looking automatic.

"And that's what I was looking for!" he gritted. "A .25 calibre gun. The one that killed Slim Rorty!"

He dropped the gun on the table and stepped back, his whole manner changed, surcharged now with restrained, quiet menace, his every muscle tense and ready to snap into action.

"You murdering rat," he said in an icy voice that cracked like a whip lash. "You killed my pal and I'm gonna get you for it, but I'll give you a chance to fight like a man. There's your gun. Make your play!"

Ettore's face was pasty white as he studied the crouching figure before him, the hands just swinging above the polished butts of the .45's.

"All . . right," he croaked finally. "I'll shoot it out with you . . . but . . . but give me a chance to get set"

His hand was fumbling under the edge of the desk and Rip thought he could hear the far away sound of a buzzer, heard it and then forgot it, for just as Ettore's hand feinted for the gun on his desk, out of the corner of his eye he saw Ricco's hand drive inside his coat and come out with his automatic gripped in it.

RIP'S hands dived down in a blur of speed. His thumbs cocked the hammers even as he snapped the six-guns clear of their holsters, then, as they

swung up into line . . . the lights went out!

Two explosions split the darkness, the heavy boom of Rip's .45 beating the crack of Ricco's automatic by a split second. There was a groan from Ricco, a soft thud as his automatic dropped to the floor, and then a heavier thud as he followed it.

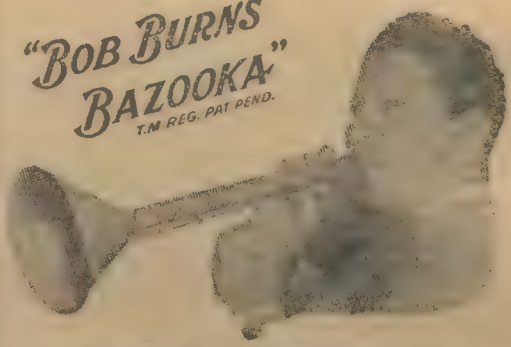
Another gun flash blazed through the darkness as Ettore fired with his waspish small calibre, but Rip had leaped aside, carrying Myra with him. He snapped a shot at the flash of Ettore's gun and the curse that followed told him he had scored a hit but not a serious one.

There was the sound of excited voices and hurrying feet now and Rip felt behind him, opened the door and leaped out, dragging Myra with him. They turned and ran down the corridor to the night club proper. That was in darkness too, and from the far side of the room they could hear the screams of women and the curses of men as they fought to get out of the narrow doorway. Rip pushed Myra under a table and threw over a second table in front of him. There he took his stand, his back to the wall, a six-gun in each hand. It was all he wanted to make sure no one would come up behind him. He would take his chances with anyone in front of him.

The door of the corridor burst open and he heard the sound of several whispering voices as Ettore's killers bunched there, but he held his fire. He wanted one man and he wasn't wasting shots in the dark.

Then, so suddenly that it blinded him, a flashlight stabbed out of the darkness and struck him in the eyes. Even as he blinked, he heard Ettore yell. "There he is! I'll get him!" and he threw himself sideways, firing as he did so.

There was a crash, a yell of pain, a



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tinkle of glass and the light went out . . . . but now a new sound filled the darkened room, the chuckle of Death! The staccato rattle of a Tommy gun! Ettore was spraying the room with the gangster's favorite weapon, a sub-machine gun!

WITH a curse, Rip threw himself on the ground and rolled two more tables in front of Myra better to protect her from the searching hail of lead. He could hear the slugs biting a trail along the wall, seeking lower down, gouging out chunks of the overturned tables. Carefully leveling his gun at the stabbing red flashes, he fired . . . . once!

The Tommy gun chattered twice more, spasmodically, feebly, as if the finger that held back its trigger had tightened involuntarily, then there was a choked groan, a moment of silence and the thud of a falling, twitching body.

"God!" breathed a terror-stricken voice. "He got him! He got the boss!" and then in utter panic, "Come on! Beat it!" followed by the sound of running feet. Rip fired twice more, high, to keep them moving, then he had bent down, lifted Myra to her feet and they were running also but the other way, toward the Rodeo grounds where Rip's and Slim's horses were corraled.

THE sun was medium high over the hills ahead of them before Rip pulled in his horse and looked at his companion. She was wearing the open shirt, blue denim pants and boots of a cowgirl. Her lovely hair was concealed under a broad brimmed hat. But for the graceful swelling line of her bosom under the thin shirt, she might have been a slim and handsome boy.

"I hope you don't mind the duds," said Rip. "You'll probably be wearing them a lot from now on."

"They were . . . ?" Myra didn't finish the question, but Rip nodded.

"Yes. They were Slim's, but I think he woulda sorta liked knowing you wore 'em," he said quietly.

Myra's face was shadowed. "That's the only thing I really mind," she said. "Not having gotten to know him. That," there was a mischievous twinkle in her eyes, "and the fact that you won't be able to enter the roping contest today."

Rip grinned quietly as he studied her lovely face under the hat brim.

"What do I care about the roping contest," he asked. "When I walked off with first prize of the whole Centennial!"

Hell in Hidden Valley

(Continued from page 89)

Jeff stared back at him, hate a raging flame in every fibre of his body, and so they stood for several minutes, neither moving, each watching the other with vibrant, electric tenseness. The sunlight was getting stronger, hotter. The silence heavier, quivering. A wounded man inside the house groaned.

"Well," barked Rosson finally, his voice off key with strain. "What the hell are you waiting for? Make your play, damn you!"

Jeff smiled grimly.

"I'm a stranger 'round these parts, Rosson," he drawled. "I thought I'd be polite and wait till. . . ."

And then it came.

Even though his eyes were fixed on Rosson, Jeff saw Miguel, standing in the doorway, snap for his gun and a fraction of a second later Rosson followed suit. Jeff's own draw seemed

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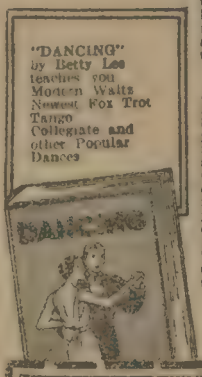

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slow, terribly, impossibly slow, yet to the onlookers it was a blur of speed. He was wondering vaguely if some paralysis had struck him or if his weapon could have got stuck in the leather of the holster when Miguel's shot blasted out and he felt the hot lead sear the side of his face. Then his gun was out and he felt its jarring kick travel up his arm, felt the recoil twice as his thumbs snapped the smooth acting hammer. His two shots seemed to make one with Rosson's and the air quaked with gun thunder. He braced himself for the impact of searching lead that did not come. He saw Rosson stiffen, an expression of childish dismay on his face, then Miguel staggered out from the doorway, crouching way forward, his arms wound tightly around his stomach where Jeff's first slug had caught him only to fall on his face.

A moment longer Rosson's big body swayed, then he too broke forward and fell on top of his henchman.

A low murmur came from the lips of the rest of Rosson's punchers.

"He got him! He got the boss!" Then, "Plug the son!" one yelled and dived for his .45 on the ground. A gun barked to Jeff's left and the puncher howled with pain, wringing his punctured hand.

"Rest easy, gents, and keep 'em idle," said Big Tim. "I got you covered all the way." Then as the clopping of horses' hoofs sounded in the distance, drawing nearer, he smiled grimly. "And if I ain't mistaken, that must be the sheriff and some of his boys comin' to see why his hoss came back last night without me after you lunkheads missed out on pluggin' me for keeps."

He looked at Joan sobbing softly in Jeff's arms, her head resting on his shoulder and his smile softened. "And

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I'm a'thinkin' it's a good thing the sheriff is also the Justice of the Peace, 'cause it'll save two youngsters a trip to town if they're aimin' to get spliced."

"Which they sure are," answered Jeff, grinning over Joan's head.

Triggers on the Trail

(Continued from page 101)

From his saddle flap he drew a third gun. "Can you shoot?"

"Straight. Dad taught me."

"You can't go into the canyon with me, but you may meet somebody who will need a slug. Give it to him first and find out if you made a mistake afterwards."

She said nothing but her face showed that she was determined to go into Sunlit Canyon by Spruce's side.

THE forgotten trail, stubby with undergrowth, lifted steeply along the wall of vast canyon that bisected the whole ridge. Sunlit Canyon lay high up the wall of the greater cut, the girl explained. "There's an old cabin up there on a narrow flat," she said, "that I used to use for a playhouse when I was very young."

Again and again Spruce ordered the girl to go down. She stubbornly refused. They came abruptly into a widening of the trail and the girl whispered, "We are almost there. There is a place right ahead where the horses can climb without a path, and it will bring us onto a flat from where we can see the Sunlit cabin while we're hidden behind the brush. If you want to shoot, you can shoot from there."

"I want to shoot," Spruce said grimly. "I want them all together, the five who held up the stage yesterday morning. Anse Miller and his blacklegs."

The girl gasped. "The stage?"

"I recognized Anse's big hand while he was mistreating you at Pop Hacket's. I'd seen that same hand holding a rifle in the brush while the hold-up was on. That's why I didn't interfere. I wanted to follow that hand to the rest of his skunk crew. If I'd drawn on him, I might have had to gun him and that might have spoiled my chances."

"And nobody at Pop Hacket's could understand why you didn't draw when the holdups first showed in the pass," the girl said wonderingly.

"Bullets might have found some of those girls, for one thing. Another thing, I knew that five bandits meant a local crowd. Road agents don't travel in fives. They travel alone or in pairs. What they really wanted was—"

He paused, then added gently, "They wanted Cord Mason, your uncle. He died in Carson City. They don't know it, no more than you did. They would have taken him off, robbed him of the money they thought he'd have, and killed him. They'd have both the ranch and the money. I brought that with me, hidden in the stage. I'm a Wells Fargo trouble-shooter. Now, you see. I wanted to get the money through safely to you."

The girl was silent for a minute. "And I thought you were a coward," she said then. "And now—you're going to trap them single handed!"

SUDDENLY there was a deafening explosion that filled the little canyon with ringing echoes. A bullet whanged past Spruce's cheek. "They've sighted us after all," the girl cried. In a flash Spruce had the girl on the ground and behind her pony. He ran his own stal-

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lion into the brush on the hill side and threw himself flat. Smoke was rising from a crag far overhead and he sent a bullet into it.

All at once a smashing volley of bullets splattered about the ground where Spruce lay, watching for signs of the gunmen above. One slug found Millie's pony and it writhed on the ground. Spruce shot it to end its misery. He ordered the girl to lie flat behind the body.

Now the little spurts of flame above were more easily located and into each spurt Spruce sent an answering slug, hoping for a hit. Strangely, he could hear screams cutting through the noise of the explosions—the screams of women. Young women.

"Stay here," he commanded the girl. "Shoot from behind the pony when you see a flash. I'm going up through the brush. There are women up there in the cabin."

She yelled at him to stay below, but he crawled into the concealing brush and, barely shaking a twig, began to climb to the higher clearing. When he reached the rim of it, his enemies puzzled by his disappearance below, flung open the cabin door that faced him, and inside the shack he saw, in a frightened huddle, the seven faces of the girls he had met on the stage.

"Good God!" he muttered to himself. "They've taken them from the stage this morning. Taking them into Mexico to sell to the cantinas! A thousand dollars a piece, they'd be good for. White, like they are!"

BEFORE the cabin, squatted on the ground, cautiously, were four of Anse's gunmen—the four who had helped him hold up yesterday's stage, Spruce knew. He could just catch a glimpse of the burly Anse, keeping under cover by hiding in the cabin with his captives.

Spruce lay quiet for a long minute. One of the hunched forms lifted to peer down to the lower clearing, hoping for a clear shot. The girl, Millie, must have seen from behind her barricade. An explosion echoed up from below.

She could shoot straight! The gunman who had been too careless screamed as he lost balance when he was whirled around by her bullet. His body toppled over the clearing rim and hurtled down into the canyon.

Spruce straightened suddenly, head above the brush which had hit him. Both guns thrust out instantaneously and two slugs sang across to the cabin clearing, two slugs that were on their

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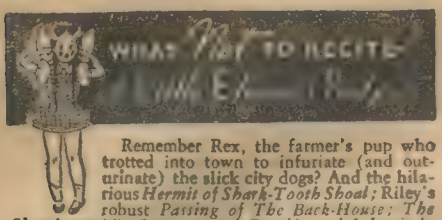

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way before the startled blacklegs could make their fingers work. Two of them went down. But the third gun barked before Spruce could fire again. Spruce felt a sharp pain in his shoulder. He was spun around and stumbled. His stumble saved him the second bullet from the other gun.

But the third man too had been too careless. The pistol below barked once more. Only Anse Miller was left on his feet—with the bodies of seven girls to protect him!

MILLIE MASON came stumbling up the hillside, behind the bush. She had sensed Spruce's hurt. She moaned as she bent over him and helped him to his feet.

"I've got to get Anse," Spruce murmured. "And I want him alive. I'm going into the cabin."

The girl screamed her protest and then Anse stuck his gun out the door and fired at the sound of her scream. Spruce's gun spoke on the flash of the other's flame. They saw Anse's gun slip to the floor and they saw another thing. A girl, her clothes partly torn from her white body, leaped into view and captured that gun from the floor. A chorus of cries told Spruce and Millie that this girl had Anse covered with his own gun.

Spruce steadied himself against the pain of his shoulder, and with one arm hanging limp, the other's gun ready, he let Millie help him into the cabin. Anse lay on the floor groaning.

While Millie gathered up the guns from the clearing outside, because one of the three gunmen was stirring, Spruce stood over Anse and told him how he'd recognized him. "Seemed like I had to get you all," he said, "but I specially wanted you alive, Anse. Now,

more than ever—thinking how you'd have sold these girls into Mexican hell-holes!"

The husband-seeking girls had fought bravely when they realized that they were being stolen, and must be stolen alive. All of them were more than half bare, legs and thighs and hips gleaming their different tints.

To one of them Millie loaned her under-petticoat, for this one had almost no covering left at all. Another time Spruce might have paid attention to the charms so lavishly revealed, but he had to lean on Millie's little body now, and it was soft and warm and melting against his.

When Anse had been locked up and the seven girls were safe at the Box-B, Goldfields Kate having been released by the greaser cook and vamoosed, Spruce brought up the subject of the eight thousand dollars Cord Mason had raised and he'd brought safely to her as a Wells Fargo agent. He said he'd get it for her from the bank in town and then he'd be vamoosing, too, same as Goldfields Kate.

Both the ranch and money were her's now, for Anse, bound to answer for the murder of Jay McCabe the stage driver, on the second holdup, wouldn't be in a position to make any sort of claim. Millie said, "There's a long time to vamoose in. And it will take me a long time to repay you. I won't be refusing you — anything — Spruce Craig," she added, after Spruce let go of her and her breasts were rounded again instead of crushed flat, "But I'm warning you. I won't let those other girls stay long. Not while you're around."

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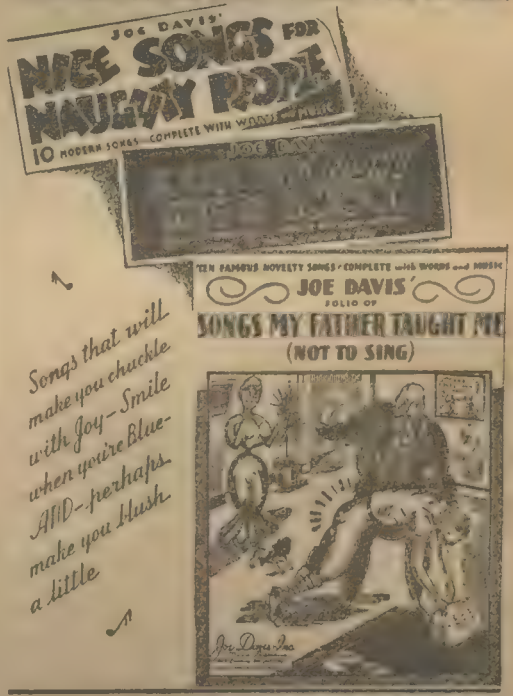
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Feud's End

(Continued from page 51)

The hair on the back of his neck bristled from the shock of realizing that an enemy had almost crept up on him. Then, silent as the stalker, Grimes drew his pistol, thumb ready to flick the hammer back when the enemy was too close to retreat.

"Simon, I thought it'd never be dark," whispered a soft voice. "Last night I sneaked to the chuck wagon—"

"What? You hid in it?"

"In that bull's hide stretched under the wagon bed. I shoved out some of the brushwood they put in fer fuel."

She was in his arms, eyes agleam in the dim light, hungry lips seeking his mouth, stopping his protest, "Yo' kain't follow us. Uncle Ca'tah was right. Though I did so't of low it'd be nice ef yo' could—"

"Just tonight and tomorrow night, honey," she explained, wriggling closer, a supple length of quivering loveliness. "Then I'll take a hoss and go back. Won't be nothing—I can make it in a day, riding. I hid some grub—"

But by that time, Grimes wasn't interested in details concerning the bull's hide "hammock" in which Susie had stowed away. He drew her closer, thrilled as her breath sighed in quick gasps in his ear. . . .

The trail day is long, and the night woefully short, yet there were a number of hours before Grimes was due to stand watch. And though kisses made them drowsy, he watched the slow circling of the dipper overhead.

An owl hooted . . . then another . . . just a night sound; and but for the girl in his arms, Grimes would have ignored it as did the herd guards and the nighthawk of the remuda. But it would be a mess, having the second watch slip up on him and catch Susie.

HE RELAXED. Then, peering toward the men stretched out near the chuck wagon, he saw a dark shape emerging from a blacker patch. The moon's upper edge was justing peeping from the horizon, though trees still shadowed most of the camp.

The figure moved silently, infinitely cautious. There was a gleam of steel.

Murder! Grimes, thrusting Susie aside, snapped his .45 into line. The blast shook the silence; but even as the

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gun jumped in his hand, he knew that he had been an instant too late. The blade sank home. The slayer leaped, whirling toward the report.

Grimes bounded forward. Tongues of flame laced the gloom. Susie cried out, stumbled; but that shot stretched into a prolonged drumming. The gunner, bolting toward the remuda, pitched headlong.

"Cut down, hip high!" yelled Grimes. "Susie—fer Gawd's sake—"

She was on her feet, but the hand that caught his wrist was wet with blood. And then the camp became a howling madness.

"I got him!" Grimes roared. "Quit yo' shooting—see who he knifed—You, Jeb!"

Matches flared. Gil Stewart plucked at the knife haft in his chest, coughed, and slumped back, dead. The assassin Grimes had shot down was Bart Bailey.

The reason for his treachery became apparent an instant later. Rifle fire crackled from the flank of the bedded herd. Horsemen charged out of the darkness. That explained the owl hoots!

Grimes made a dive for the wagon, passing out rifles. The cowpunchers aroused in time to beat the ambush, raked the raiders with a withering fire. Saddles emptied, horses pitched end for end. Instead of a camp gutted by a stealthy assassin, they charged into a hornet's nest.

They broke; and as the drovers piled into their saddles, Grimes got the answer: Melinda, Potts, and Bailey had conspired to plunder, then peddle the stolen cattle to traders in wet beef.

But as the enemy fled, a new peril threatened the camp. The cattle were stampeding. A long, rumbling line thundered along the flank. The raiders, defeated, had precipitated a panic to

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block pursuit. The drovers again were on the defensive; and against a deadlier peril.

Grimes jerked Susie from her feet and into the saddle in front of him. No time to get a second horse. Not a chance to fan out the roaring herd. They had gotten too good a start. Moonrise revealed a surging sea of long, deadly horns; and the main body, blindly following, was adding to the irresistible flood of beasts.

"The river—Simon—the river—" gasped Susie.

"Not a chanct, honey! They's cut us off, both sides—"

SHE tried to worm from his arms, but he checked her.

"Simon—you're silly—I can't last long—I'm just tiring your hoss—a wild shot—plugged me—"

Good God! Then he remembered how she'd let out scarcely a yeep. The morning before she'd yelled bloody murder, just at a scratch. She must be badly injured.

"Shut up, you little fool," he snapped, turning in the saddle. "We'll make it."

His .45 crackled. A longhorn pitched in a heap another, and a third. The mountain of beef was too high for those behind to hurdle. Horns locked, they could not swerve. Bones crushed as tons of frenzied beasts piled up, held like a timber jam by one key log.

"We're gainin', honey—hang on—"

He swung to the left, trying to outrace the further tip of the crescent. He emptied his other gun, gained a few more precious yards.

Then the overloaded mustang's stride broke. He had lamed himself in a gopher hole. Terror drove him on, but he couldn't last long. Escape every instant became more hopeless.

"Simon—you fool—"

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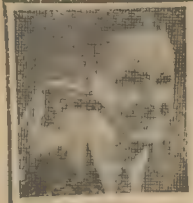

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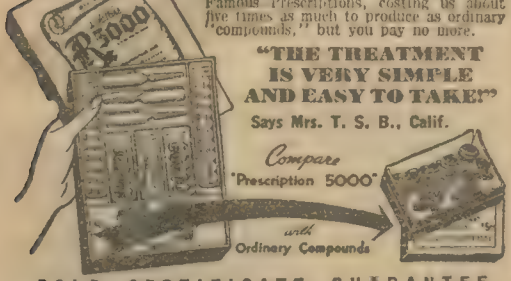

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Susie's frenzy caught Grimes off guard. She slipped free, thudded to the earth. One bit of devotion in a solid front of treachery. He wheeled, reloaded his guns, bounded to her side. It was insane; perhaps Grimes knew he hadn't a chance, even though he did ride on.

"That buffler wallow—scrunch into it! I'll shoot the hoss!" he yelled. "And pile up some cows tother side of it—"

And then, far ahead, he saw a rider skylined in the moonlight; a rider suddenly blossoming white, and wildly waving something white. A pistol blazed. The point of the onrushing crescent swung, fanned out. Hundreds of frenzied beasts with a single, insane mass mind responded to the new terror. Those further to the rear wheeled, snorting, bawling, hoofs rumbling, horns clashing. Grimes whirled, picked up his limp burden, swung to the saddle.

He flogged his lamed mustang with his pistol barrel, booted and spurred the beast till it forgot its tortured leg.

And when the horse finally pitched in a heap, the stampede had been turned. Other riders, who had outraced the right wing of the herd, came scrambling up the bank to press the advantage. The critters were milling now. Hundreds dead, but the most were saved.

GRIMES, struggling to his knees, saw the white rider reel in the saddle. It was Melinda Patton, peeled down to her boots and a few scraps that only an an expert in ladies' wear could have described. She slid to her feet, swaying as she clutched the saddle horn.

"Simon," she panted, "I came to warn you—they were going to murder—you and Stewart and as many others—as they could—then loot—"

Grimes, kneeling beside Susie, looked

up and snarled, "Yo' came to save yo' own critters!"

"No! It was you. Do you suppose if they planned to stampede the herd they'd try murder by hand, when the herd would do that?"

That clinched it. Grimes felt Susie snuggle closer. She smiled and murmured something, then slumped against his arm.

"I wonder," he finally muttered, voice dry and strained, "if you really are in a class with this gal?"

Melinda knelt beside him. "Let's forget our feud. Dad was in the wrong. I finally saw your position. Then I suspected Potts—"

"Potts?"

"Yes. After dad was exposed, and all the cattlemen got damage judgments against his estate, the bank began wobbling. The only way I could save myself was to disguise my HP cattle as BB, and get Bailey to drive them north. The money I'd raise would go into the bank in a blind account and tide me over, instead of having everything cleaned out by judgments against dad's estate. Just judgments, but ruinous.

"I was wrong, but desperate. Potts had been courting me for some time, and finally I pretended to encourage him. But when he came in yesterday, with a wounded horse, and a confused story, I suspected dirt.

"Then the marshal told me how Bailey and his wife tricked you. That nasty play set me thinking more. And when Potts, early this evening, left me on a flimsy pretext—instead of trying to force himself on me, I became more suspicious, and followed him."

"Mebbe," said Grimes, very slowly, "yo'll are in a class with Susie after all. When I git back from Kansas I got a shooting party with Potts—"

"No, Simon." She leaned closer, till he felt her warmth against him. "There's been too much hate and killing. This is feud's end. I'm grieved—but dad was wrong—you couldn't help it—"

"Honey," he groped, "ef yo' mean that, I'll even kiss Potts when I git back."

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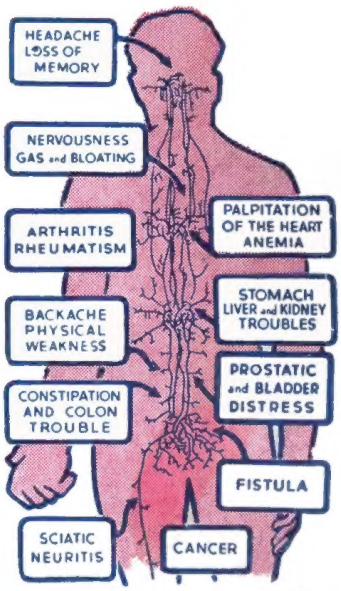

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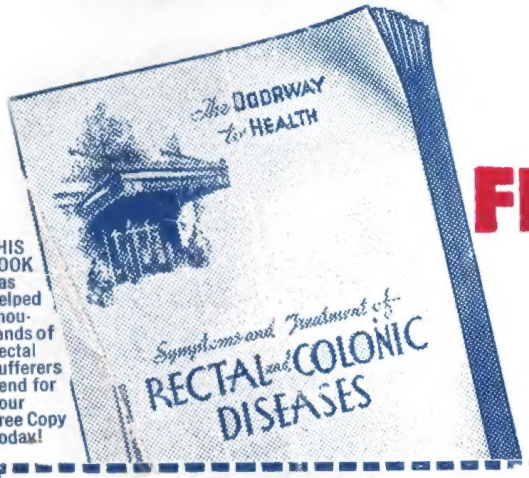

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